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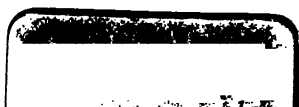
THE BEST

OF HUSBANDS

By the Author of
"LOST SIN MASSINGHAM"



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THE BEST OF HUSBANDS.

BY

JAMES PAYN,

AUTHOR OF 'LOST SIR MASSINGBERD,' 'A PERFECT TREASURE,'
'AT HER MERCY,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



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THE BEST OF HUSBANDS.



CHAPTER I.

JOHN'S LEGACY.

BUT for that chance suggestion of honest Mrs. Morden's, Maggie's task with her father would have been difficult indeed. She would have had to invent some incredible story, to account for her husband's absence, and would have contradicted herself in a thousand particulars. As it was, she had merely to describe John's sudden and unaccountable illness, his strangeness of manner and aspect (without, however, mention-

ing the actual transformation that had taken place with him in the latter respect), and lastly, his inexplicable disappearance, to produce the very effect that she most desired.

‘Why, good heavens! John must have gone mad!’ was, in fact, the engraver’s involuntary exclamation, on hearing her tidings; and though, shocked upon Maggie’s account at his imprudence, he immediately strove to soften the force of his own words, she saw that they represented his belief.

‘No doubt,’ said he, ‘this is but some temporary aberration, probably the result of fever, for your husband is just the very last man in the world to become a lunatic; so judicious, so calm and unexcitable, and, even under the most trying circumstances—with one single exception, which might have stirred a

stoic,—has always shown so much self-command and self-restraint.'

How well she knew it, and how poignantly that reference to his quarrel with Dennis Blake went to her very soul! John was not mad, she felt, and also that that very man was, somehow or other, the cause of his appearing to be so. Blake might be lying dead at that moment, and he who slew him fleeing from the far-stretching hands of outraged Justice; and what should she do to aid his flight?

'The first thing, Maggie, as it seems to me, that we should set about,' returned her father gravely, 'is to advertise the fact of his disappearance. It is sure to attract notice enough, considering that the very same thing—though under widely different circumstances—happened to his brother before him. Sympathy

may be lacking in John's case, for he was far too good to be appreciated, save by the few who really knew him; but interest will certainly not be wanting, and interest in this matter is only another name for help. He cannot have gone far; and it is all-important to take prompt measures: we should at once send word to the papers and the police.'

'Not yet, father, not yet,' answered Maggie earnestly. 'Suppose John should come back—and, for all we know, he may be at home this very moment—and the fit, or whatever it may be, should have passed away,—consider how vexed and annoyed he would be at our having made such a disturbance about him. He is, as you say, by no means so popular as he deserves to be, and malicious tongues have been busy with him enough, as it is.'

'There is reason in that,' returned the engraver thoughtfully; 'and his sudden disappearance is sure to suggest to people what occurred to Richard, and so reopen that old sore. Indeed, one could not expect it to be otherwise. The coincidence is certainly most extraordinary: some wicked fools will be quite capable of calling it "a judgment," no doubt. It is just two years ago, is it not, and the very same time of year?'

'I forget—I believe so,' said Maggie, her thoughts incapable of dwelling upon Richard's fate at all. 'It seems to me that it would be far better to do nothing at present, but only to hope and wait.'

'Well, well, dear, perhaps you are right: we will not authorize the matter to be made public. Still, it is quite certain to ooze out, if not to-day, to-

morrow: it will be impossible to keep Mrs. Morden's tongue from running, for one thing. If she were but immortal, the principle of perpetual motion would have been discovered at once. Still, for your credit's sake—for it will seem so strange to sit down under such a catastrophe and make no sign—I think I will just step round to Mr. Lynch, and tell him in confidence what has happened. He is a good man, and not a fool, notwithstanding that he is next kin to one ' (this was in reference to his sister Martha), 'and his advice may be worth having. It was a thousand pities, my dear Maggie, that you didn't send for the doctor, when your husband was first taken ill, for the symptoms might then have been detected, and we should have been put upon our guard.'

'John objected to that,' said Maggie

quietly. It was a relief to her when she could give an answer without reflecting upon its possible consequences. 'I don't think he would have seen Dr. Naylor, even if you had sent him to Rosebank.'

'I daresay not: he was doubtless very obstinate, which is itself, I believe—that is, in men—a sign of aberration. With women it is just the other way; not that you were ever obstinate, Maggie, except in one thing, and you thought better of that in the end. Even as things look for the moment, you don't repent, darling, of having given way about that, do you?

'No, father,' sighed Maggie: 'I have had no cause to repent; dear John has always been the best of husbands to me.'

'And you have paid him back at last as he deserved,' said the old man fondly. 'Now you have lost him, though it is doubtless but for a little, you have found

out how much you love him. These trials are not always sent for evil.—But I am falling into the preaching vein, which naturally reminds me of John Linch. I will just call and have a few words with him—I don't offer to take you with me, because of that magpie Martha, who is sure to insist upon seeing you; and then I will come on to Rosebank, where I trust to hear better news. Here's Master Willie come, in the meantime, to comfort you.'

This referred to the entrance of the maid with her young charge, whose hands and face she had polished up to a fine pitch, in order to greet his adopted mother. The engraver's words had been mere matters of course; but the sight of the child—whose very existence she had for the moment almost forgotten—was really a balm to Maggie of wondrous potency.

As she clasped him in her arms, the welcome tears rained from her eyes for the first time since her miseries had fallen upon her : the iron band that had seemed to press upon her forehead relaxed a little, and the gloom of the future was pierced by a ray of light. Here was something, whatever happened, to live for, and to love. The next moment, remembering that her father at least remained to her, tender and devoted as he had ever been, she reproached herself for the thought ; but, in truth, there was no need to do so. It was the dependence of the child upon herself that had so deeply moved her. She was necessary to it, and would be so for years to come ; and, as it crowed for joy, and smoothed her cheek with hands not more soft than it, she felt a rest and solace which not all the art of Mesmer has the power to

bestow upon his votaries. The desire to take the boy back with her to her desolate home was strong within her ; but to have done so now would have seemed to be to seize the first opportunity of John's absence to take to herself something that had been Richard's, and therefore she put the temptation from her. With John her lot had been cast, and not even in the eyes of others would she appear to desert him.


It was, nevertheless, with a heavy heart that she returned to Rosebank, to await, in miserable suspense, she knew not what tidings (except that they could not be good) of her missing husband.

Shortly after her return, her father arrived with Mr. Linch. The latter gentleman was urgent for immediate action : he had no doubt that John was labouring under an attack of insanity ; and pointed


out what a great responsibility would rest upon his friends if he should do a mischief to any one, and they had given no public warning as to his state of mind. He himself searched the house, and explored the garden, including the tool-house, but discovered nothing. The snow was still falling heavily, and must, long ago, reflected Maggie, with a sense of satisfaction, have obliterated her husband's footmarks of the previous night: disclosure, involving danger and disgrace, seemed to her to lie in the direction of the little wood. When the short day, that seemed more long to her than any day in June, drew to its close, and still John came not, it was pressed upon her that the police should be communicated with, and to this she at last consented. Surely, if the worst she feared had happened—if Blake had come to any

violent or sudden end, it would have been noised abroad by this time. Next to news of her husband, she longed to hear some tidings of his enemy: to know that he was alive, even if it was but to work harm to them, would have been an inexpressible comfort.


She had had bad nights of late, but never such a night as this one, in which nothing happened. She had dreaded the solitude of the house, as a timorous child shrinks from the coming dark, but resolutely refused her father's offer to remain at Rosebank. She dared not have a witness to John's return, in case he should return, though she had small hope of that; indeed, she had no hope at all; she felt not only that he would not come back, but that it was well he did not; that it was somehow better for him to be a hundred miles away, and speeding



farther still. Yet every blast of wintry wind that shook the door brought her to her bedroom window, to peer forth for him ; and all the noises of the night had dread significance. Now she seemed to hear him moving stealthily about the parlour, and now at work with spade and pickaxe in the cellar beneath. No sick man ever longed for morning as poor Maggie did, nor, when it dawned, gathered so little comfort from the light. In a few hours all Hilton would learn what had happened, when rumour would be busy with her woe, and the forked tongues of malice would flicker about her and hers like flame. Nor did her fears exaggerate what actually took place. She was down betimes, and noticed that every person that came to the door as usual tarried there longer than was his wont—the milkman, and



the postman, and the baker — each, doubtless, to satisfy his curiosity by questions, or to express his wonder. She eagerly looked for letters. ‘Surely, surely, I shall know something now,’ said her beating heart at the postman’s knock; but none came; and when she opened the local newspaper, the first paragraph that met her eyes was headed thus: *The Mysterious Disappearance from Rosebank*. As her father had expected, her husband’s departure had at once been associated with that of his brother, and a parallel drawn between them. There was even a sensational suggestion that some disused and forgotten well-hole might lie within the grounds of Rosebank, where both had met their fate, and a thorough investigation of the locality was recommended. Suppose they should examine the spinney



and discover the new-made grave! In the wildest of her horror at this idea, there arrived, as if to realize it, the inspector of police. Curiously enough, in all her reflections upon what would happen this inevitable visitor had not occurred to her, and it required all her self-command to meet him with calmness.

He was a mild and gentle-mannered man, however, who evidently sympathized with her position, and would, doubtless, have made every allowance for her confusion. After a few questions, to which she had no difficulty in replying, he inquired with an indifferent air—like one who expects an answer in the negative—whether she had noticed any signs of trouble or anxiety about her husband of late. Here she hesitated, in view of possible contingencies. Would it be better to answer ‘Yes,’ or ‘No’? If

‘Yes,’ that would lead to fresh inquiries as to the nature of his trouble ; if ‘No,’ that would militate against the theory of his having become deranged.

‘Have you any cause, for instance, to suppose Mr. Milbank to have been in pecuniary difficulties?’ continued the inspector, proceeding with his interrogatory.

‘Certainly not,’ answered she firmly. ‘He had no material cause for disquietude of any kind.’ Here she had fallen into the common error of unaccustomed witnesses—that of saying too much.

‘No material cause, you say ; was there any imaginary one, then — any unfounded apprehension, for instance?’

‘No, no,’ answered she hastily. ‘I meant material as opposed to mental. I have an impression that his mind

was disturbed, not balanced as equally as usual.'

'Why?'

The inspector had got his note-book out, and was setting down her replies in the methodical manner peculiar to his profession. Why did he not warn her, as she had a vague idea he ought to do, that she need not answer anything of a compromising nature, and that all she did answer would be used to her disadvantage? She found her mind wandering in a legal labyrinth of what was justifiable on the part of a policeman, and what was not, without the power of grasping the subject in hand at all. Was it possible that, under the pressure of her anxieties, she herself was going mad?

'Why?' repeated the inspector, even more persuasively than before, but at

the same time regarding her very fixedly. 'Why had you cause to suppose his mind was off its balance?'

'Well, from his manner when he was taken ill: his refusal to send for the doctor, or let any one see him beside myself.'

'Just so. He never dropped the least hint to you, either before or during his illness, of his intention to leave home?'

'Never. He has never left home, nor wished to do so, even for a day, since we have been married.'

'Never left home, nor wished to do so,' mused the inspector gravely. He was a married man, and wrote her answer down with unusual care, as though it was a phenomenon in human experience. 'Your husband left no letter behind him, of course, nor any document in his desk, or elsewhere, referring


even remotely to any intention of departure?'

The inspector said 'of course,' because to examine a man's desk, under such circumstances, would have occurred to himself as the first thing to be done; but, as a matter of fact, Maggie had made no such examination. John's desk had been as sacred to her in his absence as it was when he was at home, and though she at once perceived that she ought not to have left that stone unturned, she was not going to confess it in the presence of one who might propose to assist—and perhaps have the authority to do so—in prosecuting such a research. If there was anything in that desk to explain this mystery, her own eyes, and no other's, should be the first to penetrate it.

'My husband left behind him no

allusion to his departure of any kind,' said Maggie. 'I have no more conception what has become of him than you yourself.' There was something in her manner, perhaps, as well as her words, that suggested a termination of the interview, for the inspector here asked permission to look over the house and premises, and for the present took his leave.

Maggie could not help speculating within herself as to the result of his investigations; he could hardly expect to find John himself, and it occurred to her that, being accustomed to the exploitation of burglaries, he was following his instincts, without having regard to the particular case in hand. In this, however, she underrated Mr. Inspector's intelligence, whose maxim was to consider nothing beneath his attention,



when engaged in any inquiry, and when it was possible to look into everything with his own eyes.

Presently he returned, with the same demeanour of undemonstrative calm as before, to put still another question or two before taking leave of the lady of the house.

‘I believe Mr. Milbank was a very abstemious gentleman, was he not, madam?’ The speaker’s use of the past tense jarred upon her for the second time ; it seemed to corroborate the presentiment within her that she should never see her husband more.

‘Yes, he was very temperate in his habits,’ said Maggie. ‘Indeed, he was a teetotaler.’

‘So I understand, ma’am ; which is, in fact, the very reason why I have a certain suspicion. Teetotalers, like the

rest of the world, sometimes repent themselves of their good intentions, and yet don't wish to appear backsliders, as they call it. You will excuse my plainness of speech,' interpolated the inspector blandly, 'in consideration of the object I have in view.'

'Most certainly,' replied Maggie quietly. 'But my husband was never intoxicated in his life; at least, I will answer for him during his married life. You are quite on the wrong scent, if you imagine drink has anything to do with this unhappy matter.'

'Yet Mr. Milbank bricked up his cellar-door, did he not? Now, don't you think that looked like a want of confidence in himself?'

'Oh no! that was done for quite a different reason.'

'And he never repented of the cir-

cumstance, you think, nor of having taken the pledge ?'

'Never.'


'Would it not surprise you, then, madam, to learn,' continued the inspector, sinking his voice to a confidential whisper, 'that there is a means of communicating with the cellar beneath this room, independently of the door, so that one might go and help one's self to wine without the knowledge of persons in the house.'

'It would surprise me . very much,' said Maggie, with well-feigned amazement. As that nameless peril, so much the more dreadful, because it had not a name, drew nearer and nearer to her, her wits seemed to sharpen themselves for the conflict. The inspector's eyes, that had proved so keen in detecting the underground passage, were baffled by

her incredulous face. 'Yet such,' he went on, 'I do assure you, madam, is the case. I could prove it to you—did I not think it injudicious to call the attention of others to the fact—at this moment.'

Should she tell him that what he had told her was no news? Should she confess to him that she was aware of the secret passage, and that her husband used it for the purpose he had suggested?

Would it be for John's advantage, with reference to the dark and unknown future that lay before him, to make a pitiful appeal to this man's generosity, and ask him to keep her husband's shame a secret? Perhaps it might be so; yet her mind revolted from representing John as a drunkard and a hypocrite, though such an admission might strengthen the one strand of hope, to which, in case of the



worst, she had to cling—the theory of his mental derangement.

‘Whatever you may have discovered,’ said she, after a moment’s pause, ‘would not alter the experience of years, or place it in a new light before me. My husband’s mind may for the time have given way, or deserted him—that is, indeed, the only possible explanation to me of what has happened—but that was never brought about by drink.’

The inspector looked puzzled and disappointed: he had made a discovery, and built a theory upon it, and it was hard to see the latter fall to pieces; but he acknowledged to himself that it had done so.

The discovery, however, still remained for a foundation to build something else upon.

‘You have never heard, I suppose,

that Mr. Milbank had any personal enemy?’


‘Oh no. He went but little into society, and, consequently, knew but very few people. With those he did know, however, he was on most cordial terms. His workpeople to a man, also, I have always understood, held him in great respect.’

Maggie had had this answer cut and dried, and laid up in store from the first, in order to meet that very question. She felt that this man would put it to her sooner or later, and that it was the most momentous of all. The inspector, as she guessed, had as yet but two alternatives in his mind respecting that possible catastrophe, which, with every hour, was becoming more probable. The missing man had either done some mischief to himself, or a mischief had


befallen him at the hands of another; and this second idea it was essential to dispel, lest it should suggest to him a third—the conviction of Maggie's own mind—that her husband had done mischief to another man, and had fled from the consequences thereof. In this, thanks to the readiness and confidence of her last reply, it seemed she had succeeded: the inspector closed his note-book with something like a sigh, as though all his ingenious theories had come to nothing; and, with an assurance that no effort should be wanting upon his part, nor on that of his assistants, to prosecute the search after her husband, and dispel the mystery by which his disappearance was surrounded, he respectfully took his leave.

The relief which Maggie experienced upon the withdrawal of the police official

was great and twofold. The examination was over, which had cost her so much to undergo, and, upon the whole, it had ended satisfactorily. With the instinct of a bird whose young are threatened by some roving schoolboy, and who pretends, by flitting from bough to bough on some distant tree, with pitiful cries, that her nest is elsewhere than it is, she had contrived to throw this human beagle off the scent; and she was now at liberty, alone, and free from prying eyes, to put into effect what the inspector had taken for granted had been already done, the examination of her husband's desk. There it stood, just as he had left it not forty-eight hours ago, with the key in it, and a bunch of keys depending from it, among them that of the house and of the office; a fact which itself had seemed to indicate to her that he had



done with both, and would never cross the threshold of either again. Her trembling touch had already discovered it was locked ; but that was no sign that John had meant it to remain unopened, a very Bluebeard's chamber, from herself, but was more likely a slight precaution against meddling curiosity. Still she hesitated to turn the key. Her husband, it was true, except during this last unhappy week, had had no secrets from her, so far as she knew ; but, by common consent, they had kept silence, save on those occasions with which we are acquainted, upon one subject, very near to both their hearts, and it was more than probable there lay within that desk some painful records with respect to it. There would, without doubt, be letters of Richard's—some, perhaps, breathing anything but brotherly love ; memoranda



of his debts, and, generally, evidences of his bad behaviour. In that supreme moment of anxiety and suspense, it curiously flashed upon her, that her father's invention of the 'terminable ink' would, in such a case, be an inestimable blessing. If all the letters that have been written from brother to brother in scorn and hatred since the world began could have been so indited—if written words did *not* remain to add fuel to the flame of wrath whenever the eye reverted to them, but became a harmless blank, what ill-blood would have been spared to poor humanity! It would be a dreadful thing to come upon some insolent, defiant, ungrateful letter of poor misled Richard's, *now*. Thus she pictured the matter to herself, as she stood with one hand upon the lid, and the other on the key; but in reality her indecision

was owing to the more substantial fear that she might find the very thing she sought. The pain of a diseased limb is hard to bear, and, in the end, unless removed, must needs become intolerable ; but when the moment of amputation comes, the patient shrinks from it, though he knows the thing must be, and will eventually bring relief ; and distressing as Maggie's present condition was, it seemed, for the moment, preferable to a revelation which might be the confirmation of all her fears. And yet, how *could* that be, when whatever she found must needs have been written before her husband left his home ! Indeed, she now remembered, that on that last unhappy night she had heard him unlock his desk—perhaps, nay, what was more likely—to set down his reasons for that very abandonment of her and

home which was about to ensue. Here she opened the desk, with woman's haste, and threw back the lid; and the first thing her eye lit upon was a sealed paper, directed in a handwriting that, but for the terms of the address, she would not have recognized. Her husband's hand was singularly clear and clerkly, whereas each word lying before her now was ragged and ill-formed as her father's writing had been wont to be when he began to recover from his paralysis. Yet there was no doubt whose fingers had penned them. '*For my wife: to be opened when I am dead, or when she shall have lost faith in me.*'

CHAPTER II.

AN EAVESDROPPER.

MAGGIE held in her hand, she had no doubt, the revelation of the mystery which had oppressed her for so many hours, and could have resolved it by the breaking of a seal. But the idea of doing so never entered her mind. Her husband's prohibition would have been all-sufficient for her, however expressed; but couched as it was in such touching terms, she would not have disobeyed it for an empire. She felt that she never could disobey it, whatever happened; that so long as she had reason to believe

he was alive, that packet would be inviolable ; for as to the alternative, 'Or when she shall have lost faith in me,' that was a supposition that her mind refused to entertain. There had been a time when she had not loved her husband as she did now, but there had been no time when she had not put faith in him. He was well aware of that himself, and hence this exceptional permission must needs have reference to some trial of her confidence in him yet to come. Whatever it might be, it would find her ready for it: deaf to every malicious tongue, blind to every act of his, which those who knew him less well might set down to an unworthy motive ; or, still better, both hearing and seeing, she would have a justification for him, satisfactory to her own heart at least, let the world say what it would. What must he have suffered,


what must he be suffering now, unconsolated, unsympathized with, alone ! How out of all proportion was his punishment to his offence, since it could not be that she had imagined. What he had written in this paper could never be a confession that he was going forth to slay his enemy. No ; a thousand times no ! Whatever Dennis Blake might have done, or threatened to do, the idea that John should make up his mind beforehand to put him to death—‘of malice aforethought,’ as the law sternly designates it—was too terrible and monstrous ; and, moreover, he had passed his word that he would take no such vengeance. The enigma of his disappearance, however, remained only the more inexplicable. What could have happened—short of the crime which it was evident he had not committed—to change him in one short

night from young to old, and to drive him from his wife and home for ever?

- Sitting by the fire, plunged in gloomy but vague conjecture, and holding in her hand what would doubtless have resolved all her fears at a single glance, but which not iron and steel could have made more inviolable to her, she suddenly became aware that the French window opening on the lawn had become darkened behind her; that somebody was standing there, and in all probability watching her through its pane. Depressed and anxious as she was, she had not lost her presence of mind; on the contrary, the sense of the necessity of being mistress of herself had strung her nerves to meet almost any shock. If she was being watched, there must be a reason for it; something was sought to be learnt, perhaps, from her air and manner, when she was alone,

and fancied herself unobserved. The inspector might not have been so satisfied with his interview as he had pretended to be, and might have taken this means — by no means unnatural to one of his calling — to judge for himself of the reality of the calmness and self-possession she had assumed before him. A shudder ran through her at the thought that if he had taken such a step ten minutes before, immediately when, as she imagined, he had left the house, he would have seen her open the desk and take out the packet. Upon the packet, at this very moment, perhaps, his eyes were fixed. Its seal was turned towards him, and not its address. That was so far good, though, indeed, at the distance at which he stood, it was almost impossible he could have deciphered a word. She tapped it against her chin with an

indifferent air, as one in thought might use a pencil or a paper-knife. Priceless and portentous as were its contents to her, sooner than let this man or any man possess himself of them, she would have cast it into the fire. Then, as if to shade her eyes from the firelight, she put up her hand before them, and glanced through her fingers up at the looking-glass, in which she knew the figure of the watcher would be reflected. It was well, indeed, that she took that precaution, for the sight that met her gaze was one to have overcome the most strenuous effort at self-possession. Close to the window, with his face pressed against the pane, and regarding her with a look of wolfish hate, stood Dennis Blake! A more frightful spectacle than his scowling countenance, made darker than even its ordinary hue by reason of the falling



snow, it would have been hard to imagine; but it wore besides an expression of triumphant malice, which she felt that she, and only she, could have evoked in it. That he had driven her husband from his roof, and was come to gloat over her in her despair and loneliness, she read plainly enough; but that wolfish face said more; he had only struck the first blow, and was meditating, in his cruel heart, a second and more fatal one. Unhappily, it would not be a direct blow. In that case, she would not have flinched from it. She felt too much hate and scorn of him to harbour fear, if the conflict had been only between her and him. She would have defied him to his face, and dared his worst. But he was about to strike at her—it was as plain to her as though she saw his lifted knife and John between

them — through her already stricken husband. And how should she ward the blow? These thoughts passed through her in a flash, more quickly than one snow-flake was succeeding another, and then she rose and confronted him. Perhaps he had expected her to start and shriek, for he held up his hand, as if for silence; but she was careful to exhibit mere pained surprise, indignant annoyance.

‘Let me in,’ said he, with his mouth against the pane. ‘I wish to have a word with you alone. You had best do it,’ added he menacingly.

She would have unlocked the glass door and let him in, but for the packet, which had doubtless already caught his eye, and which she felt he would have been quite capable of taking from her by force. ‘If you have business with me,

my servant will admit you,' answered she haughtily.

He hesitated, and cast a look at the frail barrier between them, such as made her seize the bell-rope in alarm. Then muttering something between his teeth, he shrunk away, and the next moment she heard his ring at the front door.

In an instant she had hidden the packet in her bosom, and felt, by comparison, sheathed in mail, and armed to meet him.

'There's Mr. Dennis Blake, of all men, at the door, ma'am!' exclaimed the housekeeper, entering precipitately, and with undisguised alarm. 'I judged, of course, you would not see him—still, it is quite possible he might have some news of master.'

'That is to the last degree unlikely,' observed Maggie coldly. 'Still, if he

has really business with me, show him in.'

It seemed that Mr. Dennis Blake had business with her, for immediately afterwards he was ushered in. At the sight of this man standing under her own roof-tree, whom she verily believed to have had some hand in Richard's death, her heart began to beat with passionate indignation; yet she dared not lay her hand upon it, lest she should betray the presence of that secret which, very literally, lay next her heart. The door had closed behind him, and they were alone; still, for some moments neither spoke, but stood regarding the other, like fencers about to engage, and who have taken the buttons off their foils. At last Blake spoke in that hoarse, sullen voice that is so often the index of mental deformity, and which perhaps he could


not have softened if he would : 'Is the man gone that was here awhile ago ?'

'What man ?'

'The policeman. Don't suppose that I was asking upon my own account,' continued he, with a sneer, in reply to her gesture of assent. 'A policeman is nothing to me, one way or another.'

If she had never entertained a suspicion of this ruffian's having broken the law, she would have entertained it now ; his insolent, braggart air was the very hall-mark of Felon. So furious did it make her against him, recalling as it did to her his imputed crime, that she felt a desire to take him by the throat and tax him with it.

'If you are come here, as you have said, upon business, Mr. Blake,' said she sternly, 'I must beg that you confine yourself to that topic.'



‘I will,’ said he, approaching her, with menacing eyes, and striking his clenched hand upon the table. ‘Your husband is my topic, madam ; where is he ?’

‘That is the question—supposing I wished to put any question to you, which I do not,’ returned Maggie fiercely—‘that I should rather ask of *you!* He has left me, without warning, *just as his brother left this house two years ago!*’

‘Ah!’—he stepped back a pace, but keeping his eyes fixed upon her with great intentness—‘you associate those two circumstances together, do you ?’

‘I do ; and I associate them both with you.’

‘There you are right,’ said he ‘with a crooked smile, that seemed to her to speak of audacious guilt—the triumphant hardihood of impunity. ‘My business, then, will need the less introduction. If

it should try your nerves a little, that is not my fault, but his who has made this visit necessary. I ask you once more, madam, where is your husband? He has left you, you say, without warning, as his brother did, yet not, I will venture to assert, without letting his dear wife—that should have been his brother's—know whither he is gone. And I must know that too. I should have kept to my bargain, and left you alone, unmolested, if he had kept to his. But if he has run away, that is equivalent to breaking it.'

'Run away? What cause should my husband have to run away?' answered Maggie boldly. 'What thing has John Milbank ever done of which he need be ashamed? What man exists whom he can have cause to fear?'

'With the thing, madam, I hope it




night from young to old, and to drive him from his wife and home for ever?

- Sitting by the fire, plunged in gloomy but vague conjecture, and holding in her hand what would doubtless have resolved all her fears at a single glance, but which not iron and steel could have made more inviolable to her, she suddenly became aware that the French window opening on the lawn had become darkened behind her; that somebody was standing there, and in all probability watching her through its pane. Depressed and anxious as she was, she had not lost her presence of mind; on the contrary, the sense of the necessity of being mistress of herself had strung her nerves to meet almost any shock. If she was being watched, there must be a reason for it; something was sought to be learnt, perhaps, from her air and manner, when she was alone,

and fancied herself unobserved. The inspector might not have been so satisfied with his interview as he had pretended to be, and might have taken this means — by no means unnatural to one of his calling — to judge for himself of the reality of the calmness and self-possession she had assumed before him. A shudder ran through her at the thought that if he had taken such a step ten minutes before, immediately when, as she imagined, he had left the house, he would have seen her open the desk and take out the packet. Upon the packet, at this very moment, perhaps, his eyes were fixed. Its seal was turned towards him, and not its address. That was so far good, though, indeed, at the distance at which he stood, it was almost impossible he could have deciphered a word. She tapped it against her chin with an

indifferent air, as one in thought might use a pencil or a paper-knife. Priceless and portentous as were its contents to her, sooner than let this man or any man possess himself of them, she would have cast it into the fire. Then, as if to shade her eyes from the firelight, she put up her hand before them, and glanced through her fingers up at the looking-glass, in which she knew the figure of the watcher would be reflected. It was well, indeed, that she took that precaution, for the sight that met her gaze was one to have overcome the most strenuous effort at self-possession. Close to the window, with his face pressed against the pane, and regarding her with a look of wolfish hate, stood Dennis Blake! A more frightful spectacle than his scowling countenance, made darker than even its ordinary hue by reason of the falling



snow, it would have been hard to imagine ; but it wore besides an expression of triumphant malice, which she felt that she, and only she, could have evoked in it. That he had driven her husband from his roof, and was come to gloat over her in her despair and loneliness, she read plainly enough ; but that wolfish face said more ; he had only struck the first blow, and was meditating, in his cruel heart, a second and more fatal one. Unhappily, it would not be a direct blow. In that case, she would not have flinched from it. She felt too much hate and scorn of him to harbour fear, if the conflict had been only between her and him. She would have defied him to his face, and dared his worst. But he was about to strike at her—it was as plain to her as though she saw his lifted knife and John between

quiet for the present, yet I am obliged to bestir myself. If he really is not here, I must put the screw on *you* !'

Maggie heard but little of these excuses : she had only a general impression of menace—of ruin held in suspense over her for some motive which, whatever it might be, had nothing to do with mercy ; the words that kept ringing in her ears were these : ' I possess the proof of it in his own handwriting ;' the proof, that was, of her husband's culpability in the eye of the law. That Blake did possess it she had no doubt. His presence there was too audacious to be explained by anything short of the fact. If the life and honour of her husband were not in this man's hand, he at least imagined that they were so. An idea flashed upon her, which for the moment lit up her soul with hope. If this compro-

my servant will admit you,' answered she haughtily.

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'That is to the last degree unlikely,' observed Maggie coldly. 'Still, if he

‘If what you say is true, or any of it,’ observed Maggie calmly, ‘how comes it you have not received your dues? How does it happen that you have gone so long without them, and that only when my husband leaves his home you come hither to put the screw, as you call it, upon an unprotected woman? You would never have dared to come if he had been here!’

‘I should not have come, madam—not because I was afraid of him; the fear is quite on the other side, I do assure you—but simply because, in that case, there would have been no occasion for my coming. The little arrangement between him and me dates only from the other night, nor had I the slightest reason to doubt Mr. Milbank’s intention of fulfilling it, until I heard that he had fled from his home. The creditor

is naturally suspicious when he hears that his debtor has levanted; and I have come here to know for certain from your lips how matters stand. If your husband has really taken himself off, there is no need for concealment between you and me as to the why and wherefore; you must then indeed know all, or you might fail to perceive the necessity of being my banker; but if, on the other hand, he is coming back again, I warn you that I had better not let the cat out of the bag, for it is a cat he would be very unwilling for you to see.'

'I have no wish to pry into my husband's secrets,' observed Maggie steadily, 'and least of all to hear them from the lips of such a man as you.'

'That is very dutiful, madam, and very wise — wiser, perhaps, than you

have any idea of. (The compliment to myself I pass over, as being beside the question.) Yes—to be convinced, against one's will, of the infamy of the Best of Husbands—nay, if you flare up at *that*, you are certainly right to shun the truth—of course it is better to keep your eyes shut, and hope the best. But still I have my own interest to look to, and that may compel me to open them.'

'To keep her eyes shut, and hope the best!' That taunt of this heartless wretch exactly described the condition of mind at which Maggie had arrived. Her only safety from despair seemed to lie in ignorance. She might indeed, perhaps, have dared to learn the worst, but for the remembrance of the packet that lay in her bosom. 'When I am dead, or when you have lost your faith in me, seek to know all, but not till


then,' it said. And she would wait till then.

'I do not understand what it is you want of me,' said she, after a long pause.

'I want nothing—for the present—except a little information. You told me awhile ago that you did not know whither your husband had gone. Now, with the new lights that may have broken upon you in the meantime, just reconsider that answer. I have no doubt you gave it to the inspector, to your father, to Mr. Lynch, and the rest of them; but still, it may not have been *quite* correct, for all that. The rumour—propagated by yourself, as it in all probability has been—that John Milbank has gone mad is, I *know*, untrue: on Tuesday night last, I can answer for it, he was quite well in health, and in full possession of his faculties. It would be

very well for him if he did go mad, perhaps, but that would not suit my book. Now, since you have stooped to one little deception, you may possibly have ventured upon another. He may have told you everything, for all I know, and the whole affair may be a plant to escape his liabilities. You must, therefore, excuse my once more repeating a question you have already answered in the negative.'

'I do not know where my husband is, Mr. Blake,' said Maggie firmly, 'nor why he has left me. On the other hand, you are right in supposing that I have practised some deception. My husband is not mad; it was to save my own wifely pride from humiliation that, having no reason to give for his desertion of me, I feigned he was so: Mr. Milbank is as sane as I am.'



‘And he has written to you since his absence?’ broke in the other cunningly. ‘You were reading a letter from him just before I entered; I should like to see that letter.’ And he cast a greedy eye towards the desk.


‘My husband’s letters are sacred from all eyes but mine,’ replied Maggie coldly. ‘I will, however, tell you this much of its contents: though he gives neither address, nor explanation of his absence, he promises to return home within the week.’

‘The week!’ echoed Blake, glancing at her with quick suspicion. ‘Why the week?’

‘I know nothing of that, for he gives his reasons for nothing. “I shall return on the 14th,” he says; that is all he writes about his movements.’

‘I don’t understand it,’ mused Blake

thoughtfully. 'But then, unless he was really mad—which we both know he is not—I don't understand his going away at all. He knows he cannot escape me; that death itself would only transfer my hold on him from him to you. Yes, you would have to pay, madam, handsomely, liberally, if you have the regard for him with which he credits you, and which I do not doubt. Still, you may have some plan between you by which you imagine that Dennis Blake may be checkmated. You would be building on the sand, it is true, nay, on the ice itself; and your punishment would be swift and dire. That would not be to my advantage, I confess it,' added he sharply; 'but revenge is sweet, and I would have it; such revenge as you cannot dream of, and which would make up for all. One does not fear to fall,



you understand, just so far'—and he held his hand a few feet from the floor—
'when one drags down one's enemy from his pride of place in the very skies.'

'I do not doubt your malice, sir.'


'You are right there madam,' cried he, with sudden ferocity. 'Nor need you doubt my power to indulge it. However, a few days more or less will not alter matters: you may be lying to me—I daresay you are—but I will wait the week.'

'And then?'

'Then I shall come again with the confess—— I mean with the proofs I spoke of, in your husband's handwriting, and in his absence make my terms with *you*. They will be such as, if I were to state them now, might well astound you; and yet you will acknowledge that they might be harder. Do

not trouble yourself, however, with thinking what that secret is, the hush-money for which is so secure ; for when you learn it, take my word for it, that the dearest wish of your heart will be that it could be unlearnt. And above all things'—here he stretched out a menacing finger—'do not hope that by any plot or plan you can escape me ; my eye will be on you from this hour, vigilant as that of the miser upon his store ; and if you did escape, it would only be as the flight of the tethered bird, who, with the first beat of his wing, perceives the string that binds him. You will see me this day week, madam, and at the same time.'

'Not the same time,' exclaimed Maggie firmly. 'If your business is such as you describe it to be, the morning is surely no time for its discussion. We must be



alone, and not liable to interruption. Let it be evening.'


He looked at her with searching eyes as he replied: 'Is this to gain time, mistress? or is it that you do not wish your neighbours to suppose that Dennis Blake is on your list of morning callers? Well, perhaps you are right. If we come to terms—and there is no help for that, I promise you—it will be better that no connection between me and Rosebank shall have been suspected; and a few hours more or less cannot affect my position. This day week, then, in the evening.' With a surly sideways nod, pregnant with menace, by way of parting salutation, Maggie's visitor withdrew, gazing sternly at her to the last, and she at him.

CHAPTER III.


AN EVENING INTERVIEW.

‘THIS day week, then,’ reflected Maggie, as she stood where Blake had left her, staring thoughtfully into the fire, ‘this man will be here again with John’s confession!’ That was the word he used, or had been about to use, and she did not blink it. It was necessary to look all things in the face that it was lawful for her to look at. It was not lawful for her to open the packet she carried in her bosom, and learn the worst—that worst which Blake had told her she would so bitterly wish unlearned; for John was not

dead, nor had she even yet lost faith in him. That he had got into trouble, nay, that there was danger to his life, she did not doubt, and, somehow or other, this villain had the power to bring destruction and shame upon him. But she did not believe him guilty in a moral sense. If she had done so, nay, if she had had any doubt of him, it would have been clearly her duty to put herself upon equal terms with her enemy, by gaining possession of all the facts, and then to fight him as best she could. As it was, she had small choice of weapons, but of such as they were, she had already made her choice. While she had been listening, or seeming to listen, to her visitor, nay, even while she had been talking to him, she had been all the while selecting it, sharpening it, balancing it in her hand. As to the temper of the blade, she could tell



nothing for certain, till the moment had come to strike; but she believed in it, and was resolved to use it. That was something! Instead of brooding over her present calamities, or upon the coming peril, she had that blow to think of—the one desperate blow she was about to give, not in self-defence, but in defence of one dearer than herself—and its effect. If the steel were true, and did its duty, it might so cripple her foe that he need be no longer feared; but if it broke in her grasp and failed her, matters would even be worse than they were. The blow would recoil upon herself—nay, more, upon her husband—and bring upon them both immediate and utter ruin. It was a terrible risk, but she must take the risk, having no option. What a little weapon it was, and, up to this hour, how she had despised it! If it should do her




this good service, how she would prize it, and bless and cherish the dear hand that had placed it within her reach !

The idea of John's returning home, and thereby releasing her from personal responsibility in the affair, did not enter into her mind. She felt that he would never return ; that he dared not do so, because of this vile wretch and what he knew ; that there could be none to help her—and her instinct told her truth.

Hour after hour, day after day, passed by, and yet there came no tidings of John Milbank. Just as in the case of his brother Richard, he had disappeared leaving no trace behind him. No one had seen him in the street, in the highway, nor at the railway station. (They might well have done so, however, thought Maggie, bitterly, and yet not recognised him). The newspapers indulged them-

selves in the wildest conjectures; the police were utterly at fault. Mr. Inspector Brain (for that was the name of the officer who had 'charge' of the now famous 'Rosebank case') was often at the house, closeted with Maggie alone, or in consultation there with her father and Mr. Linch. But nothing came of all this stir. The traces of John's departure seemed to have melted away as utterly as the snow on which his last footsteps had been imprinted.

And so the day came round at last which was to bring Dennis Blake and his dread news. Maggie had no hope that he might fail to keep tryst from any cause: that he might have gone away, or that he might be ill, or that he might have repented through any sense of insecurity or loss of power over her. She painted to herself none of



those chances in her favour which we are all so apt to paint, when a great misfortune threatens us; she clung to no straws, but looked at her peril, not in the face, indeed, for it had no face—it was only a terrible something over which a cloth hung loosely, suggesting the sharp, stiff outlines of Death; but she looked at *that* with steady eyes, hoping and praying that when Blake's cruel hand should twitch it away, and show the features, she should be calm and steady still. Maggie knew that it would have been idle to attempt to conceal that this man had already called at Rosebank, and she had made up some story of an old debt of Richard's to him, which he wished his brother to settle, to account for the fact. It had, fortunately, seemed to those who knew him not inconsistent with Blake's character

that he should have taken this audacious step on hearing that John had left his home; the extortion of money under false pretences being a line of business very likely for him to take up, should any opening in that way seem to offer itself. But both Mr. Linch and her father had expressed such indignation at the occurrence, that it had actually added a weight to the burden of her cares. What if they should meet, and tax him with his villany, and put him so beside himself with their reproaches, that he should tell *them* the secret of his power over her husband! On this very day, her father had remained with her later than usual, and she was on thorns, lest, while he was still in the house, Blake should present himself at the door, and there should be a scene, such as she dared not picture to herself,

since one of its effects might be to blunt that weapon which was the only hope she had, or even make it useless. In the conflict that was about to ensue between her and Blake, it was above all things essential to her plan that they should be alone. At half-past eight, however, on that long-looked-for evening, the engraver left her, and at nine came Dennis Blake, and was at once, by her directions, admitted into the parlour. The fire was burning brightly, there were candles as well as a lamp upon the table, and the room, with its close-drawn curtains, looked very snug and home-like. Such was the impression, at all events, that it seemed to have upon the newcomer, for he looked around him with great complacency, so much so, indeed, that a casual observer would have concluded that all these evidences of comfort

were signs of his own prosperity, and that the place belonged to himself.

‘Well, madam, so there is no news of this husband of yours?’ said Blake, declining the seat to which Maggie motioned him, and taking his stand-point upon the rug, with his back to the fire, as though he were the proprietor of the house. ‘No news at all, I suppose?’

‘None at all.’

‘Ah, I thought as much,’ continued the other bluntly. ‘He has bolted for good and all, to save his neck.’

‘I have heard you say that before,’ observed Maggie, looking quietly up at him, from some work in which she was making-pretence to be engaged; ‘and I tell you now, as I told you then, you lie!’

‘Indeed!’ cried he, with a harsh, discordant laugh. ‘I don’t remember that you were quite so sure, or so plump as

that. However, it is very excusable. That this model of morality should have done anything wrong, is, of course, astonishing to you; and that, having done it, this Best of Husbands should have run away, and left his wife to bear the brunt of it, and pay the piper for it, that seems still stranger, don't it ?'

'It seems, and is, incredible,' observed Maggie coldly.


'Incredible, is it? Well, it may even seem that: however, seeing is believing, they say, and before we have had this talk out I shall be compelled to open your eyes. The story I have to tell you begins from a long time back; but not to be wearisome, let us strike down into it about two years ago, when the incident took place to which I mainly owe the honour of this interview. I allude to Richard Milbank's disappearance. Do

you remember, on the morning afterwards, your present husband's overtaking me in the street, when you and your father were with him, and putting certain questions to me?'

'I do remember it.' Maggie's tones were quiet at all times, but she spoke now with unusual gravity and distinctness, as though she weighed every word.

'Well, what he inquired of me was, whether I had seen Richard on the previous night—or, rather, far into the morning. And I answered "No." It was not the truth, yet it was not telling him a lie, inasmuch as he knew that it was not the truth. He knew that Richard had gone from him to me between three and four, and yet that I was not the last person who beheld him ere he left the town.'

'Indeed!' observed Maggie, with the



air of one who is interested in spite of herself. 'How could that be?'

'You should rather ask me, how could I know that it was so,' continued the other, 'especially since it was your own handiwork that lay at the bottom of it all. Do you remember imitating in jest, and to please the man for whom you would have done it in earnest, John Milbank's signature?'

'No,' answered Maggie, keeping her eyes firmly fixed on that of her interlocutor; 'I do not.'

'You did it, madam, however, nevertheless: I do not say with any bad intentions, but you did it. The piece of paper on which you wrote that name was an order for a thousand pounds; and not long afterwards—in the course of business—it happened to fall into my hands. A forged bill, in some cases, is

worth quite as much as a good bill, and so it happened with this one. Having my doubts about its genuineness, I went to the drawer myself—your present husband, and, greatly to my surprise, he cashed it. And again—so curious are some mercantile transactions—the money John Milbank paid for that forged bill was not lost to *him*. He got his money's worth out of it—and you, madam, were mixed up in this part of the business every whit as much as at the beginning—by holding it *in terrorem* over Richard's head. “If you don't leave the country,” he said, “and the business, and the young woman, for whom I have quite as great a fancy as you have, I'll put you in the dock for forgery.” He'd got Master Richard in a cleft stick, you see, and there was nothing for him but to cave in; and he did cave in. He


wrote a letter, at his brother's dictation, to say that he was about to leave Hilton for good and all; and John gave him a hundred pounds to go with; and he went.' Here Blake's thin lips broke into a derisive smile, and he repeated the words, 'He went,' like one who rolls some choice morsel under his tongue.

'Is this all you have to tell me?' inquired Maggie quietly.

'No; it is not,' answered the other with a sneer; 'nor nearly all. Richard went, but he didn't go very far. Upon his way out of the country, not half a mile out of Rosebank, he stopped at my lodgings, to settle accounts with me. I had promised, you see, not to present the bill for a few months—at which time he hoped to have been safe over the seas, and to snap his fingers at me; and he was naturally irritated that I should have

doubted his stainless honour in the matter, and made personal inquiries. He called, in fact, in a bad humour; but I very soon put him into a good one with the news that his brother had admitted the signature of the bill to be his own, and had cashed it. He had no more power to prosecute him then, you see, than if the offence had never been committed. Your husband must have got the character of being a good man of business on very cheap terms, not to have foreseen this, and to have let me keep the bill; but he was soft-hearted, it seems, about the possible consequences, especially as regarded you. You would not have relished giving evidence in open court against your lover, and describing how he had made a cat's-paw of you to rob his brother. Don't you see?'

'I see what you mean,' answered



Maggie, scarcely able to repress a shudder.

‘Well, finding the law could not touch him, Richard cared little for the promise he had given, or the letter he had left behind him, and from that moment thought no more of leaving Hilton than I did; so we sat down together to a friendly game at piquet, in the course of which I won that hundred pound cheque of him, about which there was afterwards such a fuss; and that put his back up, and he said he would play no more, but would go home. Do you understand me? He said he would go home—that is, to this very house.’

She understood him well enough, and would have told him so, but that her tongue refused its office.

‘It is surely quite intelligible,’ continued he, misconstruing her silence,

‘why Richard should have come home. He had no longer cause to fear his brother, and was greatly irritated with him for having frightened him unnecessarily. He had been also drinking pretty freely, and was in the humour for a quarrel. He left my lodgings between four and five in the morning—I let him out with my own hands, and saw him go—and he took the road to Rosebank.’

‘I have your word for that,’ said Maggie, in bold, contemptuous tones.

‘Yes; you have but that at present, and I don’t blame you for not being in a hurry to believe it,’ continued Blake coolly. ‘Nor was I in a hurry to believe your excellent husband when he came to me with that cock-and-bull story of his brother having gone away from Hilton to try his fortune in America or the Antipodes. In the first place, he could have

had no money to go with unless John had replenished his purse for him ; in the next place, he would not have gone if it had been replenished. Master Dick had his own attractions at Hilton besides yourself, as you have since discovered, and was generally disinclined to make his fortune anywhere, preferring to have it ready-made at home by John. However, it was not for me to say so ; that one hundred pound bill might still have taken an ugly turn (though I had won it fairly enough), and it was high time to be washing my hands of Dick, for other reasons. I did not wish, either, to have it said of me that I had got that cheque out of him—precious glad, I remember, I was to get it changed—between three and four in the morning at my own lodgings ; so, when John asked had I seen his brother that night, I answered

"No." It was an answer that he was very glad to get, though I saw he didn't believe it; and if I had known what a weight it took from his mind, I would never have uttered it. I might have had him under my heel at that moment—if I had only known all—almost as safe as I have him *now*.' Here he raised his foot and beat it upon the rug, as though his enemy were actually and indeed beneath it. 'Can you guess at all, my pretty madam, what I am coming to presently?' inquired he hoarsely.

'I *cannot*,' answered she firmly.

'I daresay not: I did not even guess it myself at that time; I knew John Milbank to be a stuck-up sneak and hypocrite; I hated him almost as I hate him now, even then, but I did not credit him with—MURDER.'

Maggie knew what was coming—had

been prepared for it from almost the very first—and had never for an instant lost the consciousness of a certain dire necessity for preserving her self-command, yet she shuddered from head to foot as she echoed that dreadful word with her parched tongue: ‘Murder?’

CHAPTER IV.

THE SECRET WITNESS.

‘THAT’S it, madam, nothing less,’ observed Blake, with brutal coolness, after a short pause, during which Maggie for the first time withdrew her eyes from his, and fixed them on the ground.

‘’Tis just murder that this excellent husband of yours has committed; and, as though even that were not enough, the man he has killed was his own brother. Do you hear that?’


‘I hear you say so,’ was Maggie’s answer, delivered in such unmoved tones that they surprised herself. Her weakness had been but momentary, and now

that she was face to face with the worst, she felt the courage of despair.

‘You’d be game to the last, I knew,’ continued Blake, with a sort of grudging admiration; ‘or it may be that so far as I have gone as yet, you may think me a liar. One of that trade, however, it ought to strike you, would not have told you so improbable a story—would have stuck to something a little less strong, but more like truth.’

It did so strike her; and though she did not believe the fact—she would as easily have been persuaded that the sun was black, as that John Milbank was a murderer—she did believe that Dennis Blake was stating what he deemed was true. Remembering what her last reply had cost her, she answered him by a haughty gesture expressive of incredulity and contempt.

‘Well, it is something that one can get you to listen,’ continued the other dryly; ‘that you don’t fly out, as some fools would in your case, into a passion and clamour that would ruin all. I always thought you a sensible woman, except as regarded Master Dick—There, there; I’ll say no more about that, then’—for Maggie had risen with such a look of rage and scorn upon her face as bade him pause—‘but will proceed to the proof at once. I no more thought at first, as I have said, of anything more serious than a quarrel having happened between the two brothers than you did, notwithstanding it was clear to me John had some good cause for concealing that Richard had returned to him that night; and even when the lost man did not turn up, I took the other’s word for granted that he had left the town, notwithstand-



ing the private reasons I had for holding his departure to be unlikely. If, indeed, I had had any ground of suspicion of your husband, I should have worked upon it then, and much more, you may be sure, after I got this'—he moved a lock of dark hair aside that hung over his forehead, and showed a deep white scar. 'If I could have hanged him *then*—by Heaven, I would have done it without ransom! To see him swing would have been dearer to me than a mountain of gold!' The vehemence and passion with which Blake pursued this topic, contrasting, as they did, with the calculating coldness he had hitherto displayed, were most remarkable, and showed but too well that gain was not the only object, nor perhaps even the chief one, that he had in view. 'To think that for speaking lightly of a girl

like you, a man should be so mauled as this'—here he snarled like the cur he was, and showed a row of teeth with which art had supplied him, in lieu of those which John's hit from the shoulder had destroyed—'a girl, who, if she was not the thing I called her, was something worse, and cast one brother off for another as easily as one changes shoes. To think, too, that the man who struck me—that miracle of virtue and soul of honour, as folks deemed him; so sainted that he could not listen to a broad jest, but must needs arrogate to himself the right of chastising him who uttered it—to think that this man, I say, was a felon, a murderer, whom I could have sent to jail and to the gallows, with a word! If I could have laid him dead, I would have done it, even then; but now—knowing what I do—I feel, aye, as though I could

tear his heart out with my hands ! You, you too'—he broke out with a fresh access of fury, and pointing at her with a trembling finger—'do you think I will spare *you*, any more than *him*, now my time has come ?'

'Is this the proof that you have to show me of my husband's guilt ?' inquired Maggie coldly. 'At present, I only see the evidence of such malevolence and hate as would have sufficed to forge a proof.'


'It was not necessary to forge it, madam,' answered the other, with a bitter sneer, 'as I shall presently show you. About that time—I am speaking of eighteen months ago—I had my own misfortunes——'

'Let me describe them,' interposed Maggie, in the same clear voice she had used at the beginning of their interview.


‘ You lost what little self-respect you had, and took to cheating your acquaintances at cards; you were turned out of the club, and reduced to beggary: I have seen you in the street, myself, in rags.’

‘ I am not in rags, however, now, madam,’ continued Blake, who seemed to have repented of his recent outbreak of passion, and to have recovered his self-control; ‘ and thanks to the knowledge I possess, and am about to communicate to you, I am not likely to be in rags for the future. Your delicate reference to my late condition is, of course, meant to suggest that my testimony is not unimpeachable. That might be so, if it rested upon my word alone; but it does not. I was foolish to fly in a passion, from the mere remembrance of the past, when so much can be remedied; you were still more

foolish to taunt me with my humiliations. Let us proceed with the main business. I was poor; I *was* reduced to such sore straits that—I own to you frankly—I would have stuck at nothing. In my palmy times, I have often feasted in this very room, and eaten and drunk—especially drunk—of the best; and while casting about me in London for a livelihood, it struck me that something could be got at Rosebank which would never be missed by its present owner, while it would have put me in funds. I allude to the wine in your husband's cellar'—he stopped a moment, as though to select his words, and then continued, in a harsh, dry tone, as follows: 'I had heard that John Milbank had bricked up that cellar on the very day that his brother left his roof—for what reason, I knew not, though I can guess it now;



and hence, if I could only gain admission to the place, I might, it struck me, get all I wanted, without the risk of discovery. With this intention, I returned to Hilton some weeks ago. With the premises here I was tolerably familiar; but before entering upon my project I surveyed them with great particularity, taking care to select those times when your husband was at his office. Nothing would have been easier than to have removed the iron grating outside the cellar, but that would have been to have revealed the robbery—I am very plain-spoken, you see, madam, and call a spade a spade—and besides, it was my object to take all the contents of the place, which would have required several nights for their removal. On the whole, therefore, I judged it best to dig into the cellar from the tool-



house. The stock of wood for winter use was large, and would conceal my operations; the spade and pick were ready to my hands. My time was not valuable, and my gain was certain. It was altogether an excellent plan, and I worked it out to perfection. When I had nearly accomplished my purpose, however, and drew near the cellar wall, my difficulty increased, since, once under the house, every blow of my pick was liable to be heard by those above; and though I took every precaution, even removing the bricks one by one, this did in fact happen, for your husband was disturbed, and discovered me in the very act. You will ask then, madam, how it was that, having no particular liking for your humble servant, he should, under such circumstances, have held his hand—that had once been so

quick to avenge your fancied wrongs, or forborne to give me over to the tender mercies of the police. The reason of this was, that before he discovered me in the cellar, I had happened to discover Something there myself. It was not very much—only some clothes and some bones. Permit me to pour you out a glass of water.'

If she had been told at any time during the last two years that, under any possible circumstances, she could have been persuaded to take even so much as a glass of water from the hand of Dennis Blake, Maggie would have indignantly denied it; yet she took it now, and almost felt grateful to him for that trifling service. Her vital powers and her reason seemed to be alike deserting her, and that at the very moment when she most required resolution and decision.


‘The shock is severe, no doubt,’ continued her companion grimly, when the colour began once more to faintly tinge her cheek; ‘I felt it to be so myself, I do assure you, when that spectacle first met my gaze. To come at midnight, and in the very bowels of the earth, as it were, upon the body of an old acquaintance, lying doubtless on the very spot where he had met his death—it was at the foot of the stone steps——’ Maggie held up her hand imploringly, for had she not beheld that very spot herself, with its dark stain on the stone floor, that she was now persuaded had been Richard’s blood!

‘I have no desire to distress you, madam, more than is absolutely necessary,’ resumed Blake coldly. ‘So long as you understand the fact, the details may well be spared. I will not even

mention the poor victim's name, whose remains lie at this moment exactly as I have described, beneath this very room—under our very feet! The verification of my statement—or its disproof—is easy; but I will suppose that you accept it. There is no more choice for you, indeed, than there was for your husband himself when he found me yonder'—he pointed with his finger downward—'in possession of his ghastly secret. I think there was a moment when he thought to kill me also, and thereby conceal the evidence of his first crime by a second; but I was armed; or perhaps he had already had enough of bloodshedding. "I know who this was, and by whose hand he came by his end," said I. He made no effort to deny it, but stood speechless, overwhelmed with remorse and terror. I was frightened

myself, I own, and eager enough to get to the upper air. "Go first," said I (for I was not so foolish as to let him come behind me); and he obeyed me like a child. When we got to the tool-house, I put the wood back over the hole with my own hands, for he seemed quite helpless, and gazed at me like one walking in his sleep. When I told him, however, by way of comfort, how fortunate it was that an old acquaintance like myself, who understood the relations between him and his brother, and could make allowance for great provocation, had discovered his secret, since it would remain quite safely in my hands,—upon certain equitable conditions,—he seemed to recover himself a little, and be inclined to listen to reason. On the other hand, it was foolish in him, and a mere waste of breath, to endeavour to explain to me

that the whole affair had happened by accident. That might have been the case or not ; if it was so, it was no doubt a matter for his private satisfaction ; but so far as I was concerned (as I pointed out to him), it could not make one halfpenny worth of difference in my pecuniary demands. Again, it was still more foolish in him—the man who had struck me down in the open street—to attempt to appeal to my compassion. I refer to it, however, for two reasons : first, because his stooping to such a humiliation will bring home to you, more than any words of mine, the fact that he lay—and lies—completely in my power ; and secondly, as a guide for your own proceedings. You have heard of a heart of stone ; but stone may be worn away, they say, by water-drops, and therefore, perhaps, by woman's



tears. My heart is made of sterner stuff. Besides, I hate you both, and would not spare you a single turn of the rack—so long as it kept life in you!’

‘Monster! what is it you demand?’ asked Maggie hoarsely.

‘Money! A round sum down. So much paid quarterly—and to the very day. It will not beggar you; you will not go about in rags, as I have done; but you will be poor, and I shall be rich. Money!’

‘I will not give you one farthing, though it were to save your soul.’ She had risen from her chair, and stood confronting him with pale, resolute face and unshrinking eye. ‘Thief, by your own admission; coward, by your presence here; liar, by the story you have fabricated against my husband’s honour—I will give you nothing—nothing! I defy you!’

‘Oh ho, madam, so you guessed it from the first, did you,’ answered he, ‘and made up your mind to fight it out? Have you forgotten, then, what I told you a week ago, that I have in my possession—I have it here—the proof, the damning proof, of what I have told you, in your husband’s own handwriting? Do you suppose that I trusted to his bare word? No, no! Here it is, in black and white—his own admission.’

‘Let me look at it.’

She had moved towards him, and he stepped back towards the curtained window to avoid her. ‘Gently, gently. Keep your distance, madam. I am not going to let your nimble fingers touch a document that is worth to me five thousand pounds at least.’

‘It is worth nothing: I do not believe in its existence. It is just as likely as

not to be blank paper, and all this wicked talk a scheme to extort money from a defenceless woman. Let me see it, I say.'

'You shall see it, but at safe distance,' replied Blake, still retiring before her.

'That means it is a forgery,' answered Maggie boldly.

'Forgery or not, madam, it shall never leave my——'

Here the curtains opened behind the speaker, a strong arm stretched over his shoulder, and plucked the paper from his grasp; he turned round with the cry of a wild beast, and found himself face to face, not with John Milbank, as his fears foreboded, but with the inspector of police!

'I will show the document to the lady myself,' said Mr. Brain.

CHAPTER V.

CHECKMATED.

It would have been difficult for the most skilful of physiognomists to detect the chief among the various passions that convulsed the countenance of Dennis Blake, on finding himself disarmed of the weapon wherewith he had proposed to win so much. For an instant he glared savagely at the inspector, as though resolved, at all hazards, to regain the document of which he had been so unceremoniously dispossessed ; but there was such an unmistakable look of power in the well-built frame of his opponent, as he stood with his hand behind him,

and the paper in it, and such an obvious 'You had better not,' in his resolute features, that he seemed to abandon that idea as hopeless. But the rage in his face remained no less vehement for being baffled; and mingled with it was a fear that blanched even his dusky cheek. Irresolution, too, had as evidently seized him, as he glanced from one to the other of his two companions, uncertain to which side to attach himself, labouring between the slender hope of yet securing his object, or the immediate gratification of revenge. The former consideration seemed at last to prevail with him, for, after a full minute of troubled thought, he thus broke silence:—

'I hope, Mr. Inspector, that you know the world too well to have taken all that I have been saying to Mrs. Milbank here for granted. I confess I was putting the

screw on a little more tightly than the circumstances warranted, but that would have been explained all in good time. It is a case, I do assure you, which does not require your intervention at all. Though, I will answer for it, that you shall not have cause to regret your loss of time here. The little affair between myself and this lady may be very well settled out of court, but at the same time, you shall occupy the post of arbitrator—so far as the fee goes—and it shall be a large one.'

Mr. Brain did not reply, but turned an eye interrogatively towards Maggie, keeping the other, as it were, on guard upon his interlocutor.

'For my part,' answered Maggie resolutely, 'I wish to enter into no terms whatever with this man, whom I know to be a liar and a villain. I believe no

word of what he has been telling me ; but that he has founded his whole story upon some scandalous rumour, taking advantage of which, and of my unprotected and miserable condition, he has sought to extort money from me. That paper, I say again, if it be anything—if it be not a mere sham and pretence, with which to crown his infamous scheme—is but a forgery of my poor husband's handwriting, and will be proved so in any court of justice.'

'Have I, then, your permission to read it, madam?' inquired the inspector.

There was a melancholy gravity in his face that, to Maggie's eye, forboded ill. There had been points in that long act of accusation to which they had both been listening, that had struck home with something of conviction even to her heart—though it did not waver even now

in its allegiance to her husband ; her own answers, specially framed though they had been to meet the ears of a third person, had not always, she was conscious, been such as to throw doubt upon Blake's story, and it might well be that the very man she had invoked for her protection was, in spite of himself, already committed to the other side. Still, all the more reason was there to put entire trust in that little weapon, the time for using which had now arrived ; and to give proof of her confidence in John's innocence by daring all.

‘Read it, Mr. Brain, by all means,’ cried she, ‘and read it aloud. Whatever it may say to my husband's prejudice will be false, I know, as the knave who has brought it hither. I have nothing to fear from it, nor, thanks to your presence here, from him.’

‘Are you mad, woman?—Stop, stop, sir!’ broke in Blake, with vehemence, and stretching a hand out, in his excitement, that unintentionally struck against the inspector’s chest. The next moment he was staggering to the other end of the parlour, half stunned by a buffet from that official’s fist.

‘Hands off!’ exclaimed Mr. Brain, in a warning voice. ‘I have enough against you already, without your adding assault and battery to the list of your offences.—It is, as you say, madam, very well that we arranged this little plan together beforehand—that I am here to protect you from the violence of a scoundrel who would stick at nothing.’


In spite of this rebuff and denunciation, Dennis Blake once more lifted up his voice in earnest appeal to Maggie. ‘I adjure you, madam, to forbid this man to

read that paper, or you will repent it to your dying day.'

'Read it, Mr. Brain,' repeated Maggie steadily, 'and aloud, if you will be so good.'

'That's easier said than done, ma'am,' cried the inspector, who had already unfolded the document. 'Why, this villain, this extortioner, has been trading upon absolutely *nothing*! Such a specimen of audacity I have never beheld in all my professional experience! Why, the paper is *blank*!'

'Blank!' echoed Maggie, in a tone of wonder, that needed all her self-command to counterfeit: her heart was as overpowered with gratitude, as though a miracle had interfered in her husband's favour. The weapon, then, to which she had trusted had *not* failed her — the virtues of her father's darling invention



had been proved indeed, in a manner, and with a result, that his wildest fancy could never have pictured. How little, too, could John have thought, when he flattered the old man's whim, and helped to make it a reality, that it should one day be the instrument of his own safety, and of his enemy's confusion !

‘Blank!’ repeated Blake in a frenzy. ‘Why, this is witchcraft, devilry! Blank! Why, I have read it every day since the night in which I forced his fingers to write it ! Blank ! Why, you have changed it yourself. You are in the same boat with this woman and her husband ; she has bribed you. Give it me back, give it me back, I say !’

In the fury of his disappointment and despair, he cast himself upon the inspector like a tiger, and strove to drag him to the ground. Some years ago it

would have gone hard with the man whom he had thus grappled ; but his constitution, which had seemed proof against drink and ruin, had, as sometimes happens, without declension, utterly given way, so that he was but the shell and framework of the man he had been. In two minutes from the commencement of the struggle, it was virtually over ; and presently there was a sharp click, and Dennis Blake was sitting breathless in a chair with a pair of handcuffs round his trembling wrists.

‘ If you were as strong as you are vicious,’ remarked the inspector, taking out his handkerchief and mopping his forehead, ‘ you would be a very ugly customer indeed. I could have given you a tap with my truncheon, mind you ; but that would have been to rob the gallows of its rights.’

‘She has bribed you,’ gasped Blake hoarsely.


‘Ah, with the money that she should have given *you*, I suppose,’ chuckled Mr. Brain, regarding his prisoner with much complacency. ‘You are—you really *are* a specimen, in the way of scoundrels: quite perfection, upon my life!’

‘I tell you, this is false imprisonment, and you shall pay for it,’ continued the other, choked as much with rage as want of breath. ‘It is on that woman’s wrists—as accessory, after the fact, to a murder; I have said so, and I can prove it—and not on mine, that you should put these things.’ He held up the manacles as he spoke, and shook them at her in impotent malice.—‘Do you think your husband will escape my vengeance, through this device, you jilt, you trickster——’

‘Gently, gently,’ broke in the inspector sternly. ‘No hard words to any lady in my presence, or I’ll gag you!’

‘I say that John Milbank has committed murder,’ continued Blake excitedly—‘the murder of his own brother Richard, and that that woman knows it. I accuse her of being his confederate, and I charge you, inspector, to do your duty, without fear or favour, and arrest her as such!’


‘I should think you were a sort of gentleman whose sense of duty is most uncommon powerful!’ observed Mr. Brain, leaning his head aside and scratching it in the excess of his moral approbation. ‘I don’t wonder at the notion of another person’s neglect of it should fill your breast with virtuous indignation; not at all. The *very* finest specimen, upon my honour, of impu-



dence; no imitation, but the genuine scoundrel, with the true ring about him: brass, from skin to skin.'

'I don't care what you say of me—I don't care what you do to me,' gasped the wretched man, 'only take the charge. I say it's murder, and I can prove it. You're a policeman, and you have no choice but to obey the law.'

'I am a policeman, as you say, Mr. Dennis Blake,' observed Mr. Brain coolly, 'though, since I am an inspector, it would have been more civil to give me my title; and, as a policeman, I will just tell you how this case strikes *me*. I have heard your story with my own ears; and some of it I believe, especially that part of it where you acknowledged that you had broken into this house with felonious intentions. I happened to have discovered that under-



ground passage, which, it seems, was your own handiwork, myself, and have, by means of it, explored the cellar. There are no "dead men" there, unless it's an empty bottle or two, which are sometimes called so, nor, in my opinion, have there ever been such.'


'It has been taken away, then, and buried elsewhere,' put in the other doggedly. 'I saw it lying by the stone steps, with my own eyes.'

'You have said that already, Dennis Blake; but when you said it last, you promised that there was the proof to follow. Do you call this white sheet of paper a proof of murder? It looks to me more like a proof of innocence!'

'It bore John Milbank's confession, the last time I looked at it,' cried the other vehemently. 'You have changed it for another. I say again, this woman has bribed you!'

‘That statement is slander,’ observed Mr. Brain quietly, ‘and uttered in the presence of a witness. However, let me proceed with the matter in hand, which you will find to be still more serious. The tale you tell is a monstrous one, and has evidently been framed to fit the circumstances, which again (at least the chief of them), are of your own making. By your own confession, you broke into this house in quite an unexampled manner. Having done so, and been caught, as you say, in the very act, and foreseeing punishment, although deferred, inevitable, you trump up this strange story. What motive induced Mr. Milbank to spare you at the time, of course I cannot guess; but you have obviously taken advantage of that fact to give the impression that he was afraid of you. The disappear-

ance of his brother, and the malicious rumours prevalent in the town concerning it, have supplied you with materials for this plot, while his own unexplained absence from home suggested the time for the execution of it. You came here expecting to find Mrs. Milbank alone, broken down by her heavy calamity, and a prey to nervous fears—a victim in all respects suitable for your infamous purpose. Instead of that, I am glad to say, you found a sensible and courageous woman, who had already placed her case in the proper hands. I arrest you, Dennis Blake, upon two charges: first, for the commission of the burglary, to which you have yourself confessed; and secondly, for an attempt to extort money, which I can speak to from the evidence of my own eyes and ears.'



CHAPTER VI.

MR. BLAKE'S SUBMISSION.

A MORE disconcerted expression of countenance than was worn by Mr. Dennis Blake, as he sat listening to the inspector's words, with bent-down head and with his wrists so much nearer to one another than custom or comfort would have dictated, it would have been hard to imagine. Such an extraordinary case of table-turning was never seen as had just occurred in the little parlour at Rosebank, and, what was still more remarkable, the operator himself, and not the spectators, was the person most

astonished by the result. His dogged face, eloquent as it was of rage, and fear, and malice, wore a look of wonder and bewilderment that preponderated over all.

‘I should like to speak a word with Mrs. Milbank in private,’ ejaculated he sullenly, when Mr. Brain had finished his peroration, and laid his hand upon Blake’s shoulder, in sign that he had taken possession of him as his lawful prize.

‘I have not a doubt of it,’ observed the inspector coolly; ‘but I shall not permit you to do anything of the kind; for if you are going to try the game on again of which I suspect you, it is my duty to shield this lady from your designs; while, if there really is any truth in your late statements, it is still more my duty that nothing should occur in the

way of composition of felony. That is a third charge, by-the-bye—supposing this cock-and-bull story of yours to have any ground at all—that will be urged against you in the proper place. You were ready enough to keep everything dark, remember, upon what you were pleased to call “equitable conditions.” Altogether, Mr. Dennis Blake, it seems to me that you are in a pretty considerable hole.’

The extreme depth of this hole, however, could only be appreciated by the person in it; the arguments of the inspector were incontestable; but besides, there was this supreme and bitterest conviction in Blake’s breast, that the foe whom he had designed to ruin, and whose destruction he would gladly now have worked, no matter at what cost to himself, was probably at that moment

beyond the reach of his malice. There seemed nothing for him but, by an abject submission, to save, if possible, his own skin.

‘You can’t compound a felony, Mr. Inspector, if there was none to compound, you know,’ muttered he sullenly : ‘it was all gammon from beginning to end.’

‘Oh, you admit that, do you?’ answered the other contemptuously. ‘Well, that will save the lawyers some trouble, at all events. But you’ll find it more difficult to prove your breaking into the cellar was “all gammon” too.’

‘I didn’t take anything.’

‘That’s not the question, my man, though it is doubtless something that may be urged in mitigation of your crime, and in the proper place : you might just as well say you didn’t get anything by

your attempt to extort money out of this poor lady ; it was not through any fault of yours that you failed, as I can witness.'


'With respect to that matter, Mr. Brain,' observed Maggie gravely, 'I have myself no wish to proceed against this person. I confess that his vile and slanderous story—though not for a single instant did it obtain credence with me—has given me great distress and pain ; but to punish him would be to punish myself also. I can imagine that so base a creature, finding his case hopeless, and having nothing to gain by an honest confession, would gratify his malignity and spite by repeating in a court of justice, and to as many ears as possible, the same atrocious falsehoods respecting my poor husband which you have just now heard him utter.'

‘ They would give him another year or two for that, however,’ remarked the inspector parenthetically.

‘ Still, that would be little satisfaction to me, as compared with its cost. I speak quite plainly, and in this villain’s presence, because under no possible circumstances will I hold converse with him again, and that he may understand, once for all, my position in regard to him. Why my husband did not give him up to justice in the first instance——’

‘ Ah ! why, indeed ? ’ sneered Blake.

‘ You had better be quiet, my man,’ said Mr. Brain menacingly. ‘ I know your past almost as well as you do yourself, and I foresee your future much more clearly. If once you leave this room as my prisoner, Dennis Blake, it will be for good and all. You may shoot your little spurt of venom, as this lady suggests,



but that will be your only consolation till you die; for you will be a "lifer." I daresay I need not tell *you* what that means.'

Blake's dusky cheek turned a shade paler; but he answered nothing, only moistened his dry lips with his tongue.

'I say,' continued Maggie firmly, 'that it may be just possible that you may have possessed yourself of some secret connected with my husband's affairs, which has induced him to spare you, and the divulging of which may harm his credit. To save him so much of annoyance or inconvenience, I would willingly overlook your offences; just as, if your death would serve him ever so slightly, I would willingly see you hanged. Upon my own account, I have not one shadow of fear of you, nor one grain of pity.'


Mr. Inspector Brain placed and re-

placed one of his huge hands softly over the other, as though playing on an invisible concertina ; his head, too, moved in time to Maggie's words ; altogether, he looked the very personification of harmonious but inaudible applause.

‘ So far as I am concerned, then, Dennis Blake,’ continued she, ‘ you are free to leave this house, upon the proviso that you never enter it again, nor attempt to address me either by word or letter, nor venture to soil my husband's name by breathing it through your perjured lips. Disobey me in this in the least particular, and the law shall take its course with you from that moment ; and what that course will end in, you have just heard.’

‘ Silence, *silence* ;’ exclaimed the inspector warningly, perceiving Blake about to speak. ‘ This is the last chance

of getting out of your hole, my man, that you will ever have, and I recommend you not to throw it away. This great piece of good fortune is not only far beyond what you deserve, but I have my doubts whether it is not defeating the ends of justice. A hair in the balance would just now decide me to take you by the collar, and lay you by the heels at the police office, which you would only exchange for the county jail, and that, again, for Her Majesty's establishment at Portland. So far as you are concerned, I will go a step farther than this lady, and say that it would be an inexpressible comfort and satisfaction to me to see you there; so you had better keep a civil tongue in your head, or, since that is probably impossible, be silent. I say, I am not at all sure that I am not overstepping my duty in permitting such



an audacious reprobate and villain as you have proved yourself to be, to escape punishment. This lady, it is true, by not appearing against you, might cause the charge of extorting money to fall to the ground; but not only have I heard with my own ears your voluntary confession of having committed a burglary under this roof, but I have seen the evidence of the fact with my own eyes. You talk—in his absence—of having some “hold” upon one whom all who know him know to be an honest gentleman; but that hold (whatever it may be) is as nothing, let me tell you, to the hold I have on you. I have got you as tight as any terrier who has his teeth in a rat’s neck—and, by the Lord Harry, I have a mind to shake you out of your skin! Still, taking into consideration the circumstances of the case, as respects this

lady—and without the least regard to you whatever—and since she has formally declined to prosecute you, I will, for this time, let you go at large. Only, I also have one proviso to make: don't you stop at Hilton; don't remain within ten miles of the beat of Inspector Brain, because you will find the air unhealthy for you. It ain't often that these bracelets, which become your wrists so well, are unlocked so easily.—Not a word; not a syllable: now go.'

Mr. Dennis Blake was not a gentleman given to poetic metaphor, or he might have likened himself, on this occasion of his departure, to the month of March, which is said to come in like a lion, but to go out like a lamb. The air of proprietorship which he had assumed on his arrival, had utterly disappeared, and was replaced by one of

extreme dejection. He shambled rather than walked out of the parlour, nor did he venture to breathe a syllable, even of thanks, to the inspector for seeing him out of doors. Nay, when he found himself alone, except for the snow-flakes, and journeying homeward to the wretched lodgings that he had, doubtless, calculated upon soon exchanging for more eligible apartments, he did but mutter to himself, in dismal monotone, the reiterated word 'Blank, blank!' in reference, doubtless, to the unexpected aspect of that document upon which he had built so much, and which Mr. Brain had considerably returned to him on his departure; moreover, his countenance was that of one who, after he has promised to himself a magnificent prize in the lottery of life, has drawn a blank.


CHAPTER VII.

NEWS AT LAST.

THERE has been many a battle gained similar to that after which the conqueror exclaimed: 'One more such a victory, and I am undone.' And so it was with Maggie, as she sat that night in the parlour at Rosebank, when the ally who had so largely contributed to her enemy's discomfiture had left her, to enjoy her triumph alone. Such another conflict, no matter how signal might be the success attending it, would, she felt, be utterly beyond her strength. Spiritless, prostrate, utterly exhausted with her own

exertions—though she had but stood on her defence throughout—she was mistress of the field, and that was all. She had read how largely the element of chance enters into the calculations of war ; how its greatest successes have been attained by a lucky stroke, and how vain would have been the foresight of the most skilful generals, even when the dovetailing of this and that event with one another has come off beyond all anticipation, had not some mischance, which they have not reckoned on their side at all, befallen their foe : and thus she knew it had been with her in respect to Dennis Blake.

She had calculated on the virtues of the terminable ink to confound her husband's accuser, and on the presence of the inspector of police to inspire him with terror ; and they had not failed




her; but, notwithstanding this good fortune, all would have been fruitless but for the unexpected confession from Blake's own lips, by which he had been placed, independently of his offence against herself, within the power of the law. Throughout that terrible interview—trying enough had she been alone, but ten times more trying since she had had to weigh every word before she spoke it, with regard to its effect upon her hidden audience, as well as on the man with whom she was face to face—she had borne up to the last, though every nerve was strung to the utmost, and her very blood had stood stagnant more than once; but now that it was over, it seemed that the victory had been purchased at the cost of life itself. In her complete and utter prostration, she could hardly believe that she was

the self-same being who had endured the experience of the last two hours, and never shown—but once—a sign of that weakness which she had felt in every fibre, and the exhibition of which would have been ruin. The thought of her husband's peril had alone sustained her, and now the peril was past, her strength departed with it.

Yes; the peril was past, at all events for the present; but the Thing that had caused the peril—alas, no longer Nameless—had not passed; could never do so, as it seemed to her, but must remain before her eyes continually, a worse than Belshazzar's warning, since it was written in letters of blood. That much of Dennis Blake's narrative was true she could have no doubt: no more doubt than Inspector Brain would have had, had it not been for that impotent and baseless finale to

which all had led, but which had never, of course, for an instant imposed upon herself.


Without doubt, Blake had done the things he said he had done—indeed, they were sufficiently discreditable to be genuine—and it was even difficult for her to refuse credence to much that he had said of others. She perfectly well remembered — notwithstanding that she had so stoutly denied it—imitating, at Richard Milbank's request, the autograph of her present husband. Richard had been praising her skill in caligraphy and other arts of penmanship, and had playfully asked her to give examples of it, which she had very readily done ; and it was now brought home to her mind that Richard had on that one occasion pushed something before her with a 'Suppose that this were a cheque, for instance,'



and that she had signed it in John's name. This might have been that bill for a thousand pounds. That she believed it, indeed, was certain, since it seemed to reveal to her, with the suddenness of the rise of a stage-curtain, the real character and object of the wretched man on whom she had once thrown away her love. The representations of her father and her friends—of those who had known Richard best, and better far than she, an inexperienced girl, could possibly have known him—had gone for nothing, or even made her more kind to his faults, more blind to his vices and his selfishness; and through the years that had intervened, though she had got to have a more sober and reasonable estimate of human affairs, and with it, insensibly, of Richard's character, she had still regarded him with tender charity: he had been

in her eyes, if not, indeed, 'more sinned against than sinning,' still 'no one's enemy but his own;' but now that delusion had found its end. A man might even forge his brother's name, and yet leave something to be urged in extenuation; but to make an innocent girl, whom he professed to love, the unconscious instrument of his crime, was the act of a villain. That Maggie herself had been the victim of the device, did not affect the matter, for if, on the one hand, she might have felt more indignation on another's account than on her own, on the other hand, the remembrance of how much she had loved this man, how passionately she had clung to him, how bitterly she had regretted him, filled up the scale, and made his trespass heavy indeed.

And as he sank, so rose, in Maggie's



eyes, his brother John. For years, nay, for all his life, save since she had been his wife, she had done him wrong, and all for Richard's sake. His very virtues, because they had contrasted so with the other's defects, had been obnoxious to her; and if she had not applauded those who sneered at them she had not rebuked them. Of his love for her she had been unconscious, but it almost seemed to her now that she must have been wilfully blind to it. What a life of placid happiness, had she perceived that love, acknowledged it, reciprocated it, in those early days, might have been hers! nay, might have been *his*—whose wholesome heart her conduct had changed to gall: not the gall of bitterness, for of that he was incapable, but of disappointment, of humiliation, of despair. What a present might he have been enjoying; what a

past might he have had to look back upon; what a future might be awaiting him! But *Now!* Now she was sitting alone, a deserted wife, and John was a wanderer and an exile, she knew not where, nor why! She might know Why, indeed, if she pleased: she might learn how much was true, how much was false, of Blake's dark tale, by the mere unfolding of the paper that lay hidden in her bosom; but that was not to be opened till he was dead, or until she had lost her faith in him. And she had not lost faith. Lost? Nay, she had gained faith. For if she had not believed ill of him, even in her blindness to his gifts of good, was it likely that she should do so now that her eyes were opened to them, because this Dennis Blake accused him of ill-doing!

She did not, and she never would.

Should John return to her to-morrow, or in ten years' time, or in twenty, it would be all the same. 'Here is your paper, still untouched, dear husband,' she would say; 'nor do I wish to hear one word of what it tells, unless you wish to speak it.'

That resolve was firm within her, and to it she clung; but the days crept miserably by, nevertheless, and the desolate, watchful nights lagged wearily indeed. There is one misery, and perhaps only one in the long category of human ills, to which the mind cannot shape itself, or get accustomed, namely, the torture of suspense. What we know, and can see the end of, though that end be desolation and blank death—the loss of all (for it seems all) we love—can, in the end, be borne. Time, though we so passionately deny its power to do so,

does heal that wound; the cure is slow, perhaps; it may take years, and every year to us a century; and now and again the wound, touched by some thoughtless hand, or touched by none—the revisiting a once-loved scene, a sound remembered, the scent of a living flower, or the sight of a dead one—any one of these may cause it to bleed afresh, as on the first day of loss; yet the cure is certain. But for Suspense there is no cure, no intermission, no relief. The sense of loss, however great and overwhelming, is occasionally forgotten; the mind escapes from it, and wanders free, or sinks exhausted with its burden into slumber. Occupation is more or less *possible* to us; the voice of genius can pierce through the mists of time, and absorb us for a little in its magic words; if music cannot charm us from our melancholy, it can


soften it, for it is the fountain of tears: but Suspense has no such assuagements. Books cannot rivet its eye, nor music its ear. It resents such would-be alleviations, as the sick babe in pain resents its nurse's lullabies. They hinder it from its one function and employment, which is to watch; to listen; to anticipate the evil that is about to fall, it knows not whence, and fulfil the haunting presage of Ruin.

It is scarcely too much to say that her missing husband was never out of Maggie's thoughts, since the very dreams from which she woke to a new day of miserable expectancy, were filled with him. Whatever she beheld, reminded her of him—as, indeed, well it might, for she persisted in remaining at Rosebank, despite the persuasions of her friends. 'Suppose he were to return to-night,

to-morrow, and find me gone—even but to my father's house,' was her feverish fear, 'and thereby miss his solace!' Nay, even the very words that others spoke to her, though studiously shaped to avoid it, would recall him to her memory. 'You will get quite grey, my darling, moping here alone,' her father had smilingly said to her on one occasion, striving to win her from her loneliness; but she only shook her head, and straightway pictured to herself her missing dear one, whose brown locks had indeed turned grey, and in whose heart, consumed she knew not by what anguish, youth had died out for ever!


Thus six weeks or so of winter passed away—a winter so unusually severe that it froze the rapid river that ran by the town, yet could not numb her sense of

loss, nor cool her fever of expectancy—and then came Christmas: the hallowed time of reconcilment and reunion; when home seems more like home than at other seasons, and wife and husband sit beside the hearth with a stronger sense than common of their unity. But it was not so with her. She listened, as did other wives, for her husband's foot-step, but it was not, like them, with gladsome expectation, nor even with expiring hope—for hope was dead; and it came, or seemed to come, a thousand times to the cottage door, but never nearer, for it was but the wanton wind; and a thousand times his fingers tapped, or seemed to tap, at the closed panes, but it was but the pitiless snow and hail that mocked her; and a thousand times at night she heard, or seemed to hear, his breathing on the vacant pillow: and




so she passed her Christmas. Her father came, bringing little Willie with him; but even in that there was no comfort yet: her eyes would rest upon the kind old man, who was so good to her, and who had loved her all his life, and never more (she knew) than now; but her thoughts were far away in aimless search of him she yearned for; or she would gaze upon the child at play, yet mark him not, or, if she marked him, lift her finger up for silence. Silence for the step that never came.

At last the leaden-winged year drew to its close; and the morning of New Year's Eve broke in upon her loneliness in sheets of sleet and snow. She was sitting at her untasted breakfast, listening as usual, to the stormful sounds without, when suddenly she heard the front door opened. Pale and trembling, she started



to her feet, for the hour was too early for a visit from her father, and no one save himself and her husband was wont to enter the cottage without ringing. But the next moment she heard the stamping of feet and scraping of shoes, whereupon that little ray of hope, like all preceding rays, at once departed, and was quenched in darkness ; for John would never have stopped in the lobby though snow environed him from head to heel, she knew, but would have come right on into her beloved presence. In this case, indeed, there was still more delay, for she heard Mrs. Morden summoned, and their voices in hushed converse. The visitors, in fact, were her father and Mr. Lynch, and she had but to cast one look on their earnest faces, as they entered the room, to know that they were the bearers of grave tidings.




‘Oh father, you have news of John!’
cried she.

‘Yes, Maggie,’ answered the old man,
in broken tones; ‘there is news; and
alas, bad news.’

CHAPTER VIII.

THE APPOINTED TIME.

BAD news? Of course there was. Who is it that has reached middle life, and been so fortunate as never to have experienced that moment when he has been called aside, it may be from some scene of pleasure, or from one, at least, wherein his 'bosom's lord sat lightly on its throne,' by some unwilling messenger of woe! Whether it be friend or servant, there is no mistaking the nature of his errand. Before the 'Oh sir, come home at once!' of the one, or the 'Friend, I am sorry to bring you evil tidings,' of the



other, is spoken, we know that Fate has done us some ill turn. And if this be so on ordinary occasions, how much more when we have reason to fear her malice ! That bad news had come respecting John, Maggie was as well aware as they who brought it ; she only dared to hope that it was not the worst. Nay, beyond that deep, in her case, lay a lower deep, for she knew not what that worst might be.

‘A letter came this morning, Maggie,’ said Mr. Lynch, since her father, after feeling blindly about him for a chair, had sat him down and remained silent, as though unequal to the task he had proposed to himself—‘a letter from ship-board.’

‘From John ? Oh, give it me !’

‘No ; not from John. It is from the captain of the ship in which John sailed,

it seems, from Liverpool, some three weeks ago.'

'So late as that!' ejaculated Maggie, not without thankfulness. He had not been safe, then, when Blake had threatened him, but was still in England. Thank Heaven, he had not known his risk!

'Yes; he grew worse, it appears, after he had left home—much worse—and was not able to go on board. Nor, when he did go, was he fit to bear the voyage.'

'Give me the letter!' cried she, rising suddenly, and tottering towards them.

'One moment, dear Maggie; for your father's sake, and little Willie's, be calm. God's way is right, whatever way He wills; and He who permits the blow can give the balm.'

'Dead, dead, dead!' cried Maggie wildly; and she would have fallen on the

floor, but that the lawyer caught her in his arms. She lay in a dead faint upon the sofa; yet, when her father's trembling fingers untied the little collar about her neck, and would have loosened her gown about her bosom, she sat up like a corpse revived by a miracle. 'The paper, the paper!' cried she, remembering the sacred trust that lay there.

'Do you mean the letter, darling?'


'Yes, yes; the letter.' Oh, thanks to Heaven, even in that hour, when Heaven itself had made her desolate, that his secret was still safe and in her keeping! They put the letter into her hand, but she could not read it; not alas! for tears—what would she not have given for tears!—but because the face she should never more behold in life obscured it.

So the lawyer read it to her. It was a formal communication enough, though

couched in words of kind consideration. The captain had written, as was his duty, to state that his passenger, John Milbank, an invalid from the first, had died in mid-passage between Liverpool and New York. It was the sick man's wish that the news of his decease should be sent to Mr. Thorne, at Hilton; his widow, he had said, would understand why no direct message had been sent to her; but there was a lock of hair enclosed, sealed up by the dying man himself, which was for her own hand.

Maggie took the little packet eagerly, and clasped it close, for was there not a secret also in that lock of snow? 'Is that all?' she whispered.

'Yes; that was all. The captain had written that she would understand,' said Mr. Linch, not without a touch, not, indeed, of curiosity, but of interrogation in his tone.



‘Yes, yes ; I do understand,’ answered she. ‘It is better so.’ Both marvelled in their own minds, doubtless, to hear her answer thus, but forbore to question further. ‘Dead, dead, dead!’ murmured she again, ‘and I had only just learned to love him!’

‘He loved *you*, darling, I am sure,’ said her father simply ; ‘and, if he sees you now, this anguish must needs pain him : for his sake, then, take comfort.’

‘And remember, Maggie,’ put in Mr. Linch, not very appositely, ‘he is gone where no sorrow can touch him more, and, therefore, we ought not to grieve for him.’


They said, indeed, what they could, those two, to comfort her, but

‘Common is the commonplace,
And vacant chaff well meant for grain.’

—There was no comfort for her. She

sat with one hand pressed on her two treasures, the old and new one, and with her heated eyes fixed on the floor, revolving nothing. A sense—not numbed, alas! but dull—of utter lack and loneliness possessed her wholly: the world seemed emptied of all life and love, and heaven a void beyond it. Yet it was not so; for presently a little hand was placed in hers, and a little mouth lifted up to kiss her cheek; and at that potent touch, and at those broken tones, unmeaning as any wizard's spell, but with ten times its magic, the succour came, and she bent down on little Willie's neck dissolved in tears.

‘That was a good thought of yours, to bring the child,’ whispered Mrs. Morden to the engraver approvingly; ‘and I fetched him in, you see, at the very nick of time.’



The relief, indeed, to Maggie's overburdened heart was instantaneous, and in a little while her strength began to rally, and she was able to listen to what was said to her.

'You will forgive me for mentioning the matter at such a time,' said Mr. Lynch, in his professional tones, 'but it is my duty to inform you—in case you may not be aware of the circumstance—of the existence of a certain document in your husband's desk.'

In an instant, her grief was put aside, her desolation forgotten, and every nerve and sense became alive to defend, not her husband, indeed, but his memory.

'There is nothing there,' said she, in a calm, resolute voice, 'except some private letters. Has he ever told you that there was?'


'Indeed he has,' answered the lawyer,

with considerable anxiety in his manner.

‘And if you have not made a thorough search, Mrs. Milbank, I must entreat you to permit me to do so. The matter is pressing, not only through the time that has elapsed since your husband’s decease, but because, while the fate of Mr. Richard Milbank is still uncertain, there will be serious difficulty in case the document should be mislaid or lost——’

‘Were you yourself made acquainted with its contents?’ gasped Maggie, her thoughts fixed solely upon the paper that she had taken from the desk, and unable to grasp the importance of any other.

‘Most certainly I was. I have remonstrated more than once with poor Mr. John on his keeping in such a place of custody a document so momentous. I speak, of course, madam, of your late



husband's will, which I drew up myself, in accordance with his instructions, and for which I feel in some sort personally responsible. It would set my mind at ease—which, I confess, is troubled by what you have just told me—if you would permit me to satisfy myself——’

Maggie pointed assentingly towards the desk, to which the lawyer flew at once, like a greyhound slipped from the leash. She was relieved to find that John had not made this man his confidant, but only herself. She would have something in common yet with her dead husband, that no other soul should share.

‘Thank Heaven, I have found the will!’ cried Mr. Lynch presently, ‘without which we could scarcely have moved a step.’ Then, as if conscious how unbecoming was a tone of triumph at such a moment, he added: ‘Riches, it is true,

cannot purchase comfort; but poverty, believe me, has always power, when the first shock is over, to make our woe more bitter.'

If Maggie heard, she did not understand his words: her eyes were riveted on the child, who had toddled away to the window, and was playing at 'Bo-peep' in the curtains that had once concealed the form of Mr. Inspector Brain.

'Your daughter is a widow indeed, Thorne,' whispered the lawyer; 'she cares not whether she has been left all or nothing.'

'Yes; I always said John would make the best of husbands, and so it turned out,' answered the engraver softly. 'She hears nothing that we say, she sees nothing that goes on before her, not even little Willie yonder. Her thoughts are with the dead.'

‘Don’t you think, Thorne, if I were to read the will, or at least state the terms of it, it would do her good—distract her mind, poor soul?’

The engraver shook his head: he had himself known what it is to love and lose what seems our all. ‘Oh no!’ he answered.—‘Maggie, darling—Maggie—shall we stay here, or shall we go, and leave you to yourself? We wish to do what is best, and most to your mind.’

He rose and kissed her; the daughter who, when she was but an infant, had been his comfort under the severest woe that can wring a man’s heart; the daughter who, as she grew up, had gladdened him with her beauty, her diligence, her wisdom (save only on one point), her skill, her sympathy; the daughter who had made her choice at last in obedience to his will, and whose

prosperous and peaceful life, since then, had been the crowning happiness of his old age; the daughter whom it was *his* turn to comfort now.

‘Yes, yes; I have *you* left, I know, dearest,’ sighed she, as if in answer to his caresses. ‘Forgive me, father, if I seemed to have forgotten it.’

‘Does my being here soothe you, Maggie; or would you rather, for the present, be alone with your grief? Do not fear to speak the truth; I shall not be hurt.’

‘I would rather be alone, father.’

‘Then it shall be so, darling. Shall we take the child with us?’

‘No; please to leave the child.’

Her plaintive tenderness had itself something childlike about it which moved both her visitors; and they left her without remonstrance, as she de-

sired. Then she took down an ancient Bible, clasped, and with large pictures in it, which was Willie's delight, but only shown to him on high and rare occasions, when he had been 'good for ever so long,' and laid it down upon the floor before him; and having thus insured his silence and attention for some time to come, she locked the parlour-door, and sat her down, and drew forth the sealed packet from her bosom—for the time had come at last for her to read it.

CHAPTER IX.

CAIN AND ABEL.

READER, has it ever been your cruel duty to open the desk of a dead friend, or, worse, of a beloved son who has been taken from you in his manhood, and to read the records hitherto reserved for his own eyes? He is in heaven, with the angels: you have no doubt of that; and yet, it may be, there will be something—you know not what—some revelation of his shortcomings awaiting you, which you would gladly have been spared. It can prove him no worse than others; nay, you know him to have been better; but, at such a time, any evidence of his weak-

ness will, you feel, jar sadly on your tender regrets, and put the green wound of loss to torture.

So was it with poor Maggie, as she held that packet in her hand, and broke its seal with trembling fingers. Nay, her state was far more pitiable, for proof of 'shortcoming' and 'weakness' there needs must be, by the necessity of the case—with her the question was, 'What worse?' Oh, why need it be answered? Why not leave all untold till the Great Day when every secret shall be disclosed to the All-Merciful? Because her husband himself had willed it otherwise—'For my wife: to be opened when I am dead,' was the sentence beneath her eyes; and he *was* dead; and, above all things, she must do his bidding.

John Milbank's hand had been a good, but clerkly one, characteristic—as those

would say who see a significance in such matters—of his own orderly and unemonstrative nature ; but the writing which now met Maggie's gaze was hurried and uneven, as though the fingers that had held the pen had struggled to keep pace with the winged thought in vain, and caught but half its meaning. There were blots and dashes ; but, like the lesson which the schoolboy knows by heart and writes at speed, there was not a single space to mark the pause made by Reflection.

‘Shall I be dead, I wonder,’ it began, ‘or only dead to you, dear Maggie, when your eyes first light upon these words ? Oh, dead, I hope, and so beyond your hate ; for if I live, no matter though the seas should be between us, and half this woeful world, I should feel, I know, the

sting of your revilings, the barb of your abhorrence and contempt. They are not my due, I call that God to witness in whose dread presence I shall stand and tell the tale that now I tell to you; and yet they will be mine when I have told it. I see your shudder of disgust and loathing, and feel myself an outcast from your heart, condemned already unjustly, though not unheard. Oh, what a life has mine been!—if I can call it mine, since nowhere can I take it up and find it dissociated with your own—how full of melancholy vain regrets, and hopeless longings and despair! Surely, surely, beyond the grave I yearn for, there must be peace at last, though heaven there cannot be, since you are parted from me! Pity me, pity me, a little, Maggie, before you shall have read on, and reached what must needs quench all pity.'

His written prayer was answered, for Maggie's tears were falling in a rain of pity, that blotted out his words, till she could read no more, but sat bowed down in silence, save for the rustling of the pictured leaves of the great book, as the child turned them hither and thither without a plan, and babbled his content. Then once more she read on.

‘From my earliest days I loved you, when we were children both, and Richard was a child, whose wayward tempers pleased you even then far better than my poor devotion. I was shy and silent, and had nothing to attract your love ; while he—he had but to smile—nay, only not to frown—and all our little world was at his feet. I felt how inferior I was to him—it was impossible, indeed, not to do so, since my uncle, Mrs. Morden, and every one with whom I was brought


into contact, made me feel it—yet, as I honestly believe, without envy ; for I loved Richard myself, and envied him only one thing in the world—your love.

‘ We grew up, and still I loved him, did my best to give him pleasure, to shield his faults, and to extenuate them with my uncle. If a grain of bitterness was in my heart, I knew it not ; it had not sprung up into the green blade of jealousy. There was a glamour about the lad that blinded me, like all the rest. I did not dream what I now know, that all I did was done in thankless service to a worthless client. That jars upon you, Maggie ; I feel it as I write ; yet I must speak the truth, as I *have* spoken it, perchance, by this time, before a more impartial judge than you. I am not defending myself ; the man who does so, has some hope of clearance, of forgive-

ness, or of remission of punishment ; and I have no such hope. I shall, for certain, never see you, hear you, touch you, more : the desolation of that thought is unspeakable ; it overwhelms me utterly, and but that I have passed my word to you to wait Heaven's own good time to die, I would end all this moment. I am not defending myself, but I have left a memory upon earth, from which I would fain wipe an undeserved stain ; and to be just to it, I must speak truth, Maggie.

‘ By the time that I had come to man's estate, it was understood—indeed, my uncle told me so, with his own lips, not knowing the pain he caused me (though, if he had known, he would have told me still)—that you were one day to be Richard's bride ; and from that moment I strove to put you from my

heart, to live my life without that hope which was the breath of it—to forget you; to forsake you. Uncle Matthew knew about it. I besought him, upon my knees, to let me go elsewhere, away from Hilton, not to doom me to be the spectator of Richard's triumph. But I was useful to him in his trade, for which my brother had no aptitude, and he refused to let me go. I do not blame him; I blame none but one. The old man knew not what it was to love, or, at least, to love like me. "Take some other girl," said he, "and she will cure your itch for this one." It would have been good advice to most men of my age; but to me it was useless. I had no eyes for other girls but you, though you were blind to *me*. If you had not been so, you must have noticed how I shrank from your society, avoided the temptation



of your presence, and when I could not avoid, resisted it. It was to lead my mind away from you, quite as much as through any natural diligence of my own, that I applied myself to business, and showed no fancy for the pleasures that attracted others of my years. There was, it seemed, but one pleasure in life for me—the right to call you mine, and that Fate had denied me. Yet not for a single instant did the idea occur to me of usurping Richard's place; not because it was impossible to do so (although I knew it was so), but because I had so reverent a regard for the object of my brother's love. It would have been bliss even to think of you as mine—I dreamt of it sometimes, when Heaven seemed to have sent the dream, and Hell the waking—but I never permitted myself to do so. You were sacred from me; an adored,

but forbidden thing. It might have been so to the end, perhaps, had not Richard himself proved base. He had won you, and for all I knew up to that time, was worthy of you; he had not, indeed, that reverence for you which I had, and wore that gracious prize—your love—as lightly as the flower in his button-hole. But that was his way—a way that pleased you well, and therefore was the right one. I was very humble, and confessed my way the wrong; and if I could not wish him joy, I wished Richard no harm, and certainly not the greatest harm of all—that he should lose you. I knew he drank and gamed, but was content, for your sake and for his, to deem such errors but spots upon the surface, blots of youth, which time would cleanse. I did not judge him by myself, who had no taste for cards nor wine; and

therefore was not tempted. But a day came when perforce my eyes were opened, and I saw clearly what this Richard was. You have heard how, when my uncle was on his deathbed, or supposed to be so, some thief, disguised—pistol in hand—compelled him to set his name beneath some bond. A cowardly and cruel deed in any man, but in one to whom he had been benefactor, a crime unparalleled for baseness and for greed. Men said, indeed, that it was Richard, but I, for one, denied it, as you know. It could not be, for Richard was as the apple of his eye, whose trespass he had forgiven a score of times, and to whom he had left all he loved on earth—his gold. Yet it *was* Richard. Uncle Matthew told me so with his own lips, an hour before his death.


“I have no hopes of the wild lad,” he said, “unless Maggie Thorne should wed

him ; yet, because I loved him once, I have given him one chance, which, if any grain of grace is left in him, he cannot miss. If the remembrance of his old uncle shall induce him only to see my body put in earth, he shall still go shares with you, John, in what I have to leave."

'I think the old man meant me to give him warning, and I did so ; but I was sorely tempted to be silent, not, Heaven knows ! that I coveted my brother's portion, but, because, if he was poor, that might have been an obstacle to his marriage—at all events, for the present, and I was already bent upon deferring, and, if, possible, preventing it. Even yet, I swear, I never thought of substituting myself for him, but only of saving you from such a mate. It seemed so horrible that my uncle, who had such good cause to know how vile

he was, should have thought of Richard only, not of you. He had no hopes of him, he had said, unless Maggie Thorne should become his wife. But what hopes, if that happened, thought I, could there be for Maggie Thorne !

‘ You know on what sort of terms we brothers lived together here at Rosebank, and who it was that led the other a dog’s life. Well, I bore all that. It was nothing, or next to nothing, compared with what I suffered when I thought of the life he would one day lead *you*. Never shall I forget the hour when I first found out—what was a well-worn jest with his gay companions—that he was faithless to you. That seemed to me—who was faithful to you without cause—a heinous crime and blasphemy. Not you yourself, had it come to your own ears, could have resented it with a



greater indignation. I had long known that he was unworthy of you ; that not one of your many virtues had any reflection in him ; but I had hitherto believed that at least your love for him was reciprocated. But now I felt how hard, indeed, it was that Richard, who could be happy with another, should become your husband, while I, who had no happiness save in you, should live my life alone. For the first time the thought of supplanting him was sown within me, and though I strove to tread it down, it grew and grew. It was not without a struggle even that I compelled myself to keep silence respecting your rival ; the temptation to inform you, in some private manner, of Richard's infidelity—which I knew would cool your passion for him, and perhaps make you read him aright in other respects—was

strong within me ; yet I withstood it. I could no longer persuade myself that in making such a revelation I should be only actuated by the wish to save and serve you ; I knew that “self” would be my object, and I shrank from the baseness of building my future home upon the wreck of Richard’s. A circumstance, however, now took place which dissipated all my scruples. Dennis Blake has doubtless told you of it : I allude to my brother’s forgery of the thousand-pound bill. I redeemed it, I confess, with the vague intention of holding it over him *in terrorem*—of compelling him to leave the town and you ; but when I found, from his own lips, that he had made you the innocent instrument of his crime, I swore to myself that you should never wed with such a villain. The letter which Richard left behind him was written at

my dictation, and under the threat of immediate prosecution: he had no choice but to accept my terms. I gave him a hundred pounds—the last I had in the world—and he left Rosebank, promising that he would never return thither, or claim you for his wife. That very night, within two hours of his departure, he did return—to meet his death.'

A mist, not of tears, here fell on Maggie's eyes; her whole frame shook; a noise was in her ears of dreadful blows, and of cries that grew fainter and fainter.

'Mamma, mamma! 'ook, 'ook!' little Willie was dragging at her skirts, and pointing to his favourite illustration that lay open on the carpet—' 'ook at naughty man!'

She looked mechanically, then turned away with a quick shudder: it was Cain slaying Abel!

CHAPTER X.

HOW IT HAPPENED.

‘Do you still hear me, Maggie, or have I already said so much that you cannot listen more? Have patience with me, and hear all: it is but fair; for, though Richard be dead, *I* am dead also. Put yourself in my place, in that hour of triumph, when, as I thought, I had swept Richard from your path for ever; *your* path, I say, not mine, for it was your safety, and not the far-off possibility of my own success with you, that made me happy! He was gone! His power for evil over you was past! He could

now never drag you down with the weight of his grossness and his vices ! And it was I who had saved you !

‘It was four in the morning, yet I had not gone to bed, but was in the sitting-room, debating with myself what was to be done in the morning ; how I should simulate ignorance of my brother’s intention to leave home, when I took his letter to your father’s house, picturing to myself how you would receive the news—when I heard the front door open, and his uneven steps in the passage. I knew at once that he had seen Dennis Blake and learned all. My having cashed the forged bill was, in effect, an acknowledgment of its authenticity, and had placed Richard out of my power. It seemed to me, who guessed what Fate had in store for me, that the supreme misery of that moment—in

which I beheld you once again his slave—could never be surpassed. “So, so, my model brother!” were his first mocking words, “you are not cock-of-the-walk yet, it seems, though you have paid so large a sum for the place!” He had been drinking deeply, and his cheeks were flushed, and his eyes blood-shot. As he staggered up to me, and snapped his fingers insolently in my face, it would have been hard, even for you, to have seen any good looks in him. It was plain enough, doubtless, even to his drunken gaze, that *I* saw none; for when I answered nothing, he added: “Ah, you are not pleased, it seems, to see me back again, whom you thought to have got rid of so cleverly!”

“I have your promise still,” said I.

“My promise? Yes; you have got that, and much good may it do you.

You have also your own bill for—a thousand pounds. It's *her* handwriting, man, though it pretends to be yours; *your* name, in *her* handwriting. Why, *that* must be worth a thousand pounds to you, since you love her so ! ”

‘ Why, if I had killed him *then*, woman, if I had struck him down while he was saying such words as those, and killed him, it would not have been murder ! I only answered, however : “ You are mistaken, Richard. I can produce that bill in court, even yet, though I *have* cashed it, and bring the forgery home to you ; and I will ! ”

“ “ Not you ! ” answered he contemptuously ; “ you poor, soft-hearted, love-sick fool, not you ! you would never dare to do it ! And if you did, who would believe you ? Do you suppose that Maggie would go against her faithful

Richard—her husband that is to be ?
aye, and is *soon* to be ! You have held
your cards a little too low, brother
John, and I have looked over them.
You have wanted her for yourself (as
I once told you) all along ; but just
within these last few hours—come, con-
fess it—you have flattered yourself that
you were going to win her. Instead of
that, she will be mine—*mine* ! Con-
gratulate me ! Let us have something
to drink her health in. The wine is
out ; I will go down to the cellar, and
get a bottle.”


“ “You have drunk enough,” said I,
“more than enough ; and I have got
something to say to you that it is
necessary you should understand.”

“ “Something about Maggie, eh ? ”
chuckled he with a vile grin.

“ “Yes.”



“There will be lots of time for that, my good fellow; we will talk of her while we toast her. And in a week or two, when we shall be married and happy—I don’t know for how long; it is quite likely I may tire of her: my little Alice is very much to my taste, I own; and then there may be a divorce, perhaps, and you may marry her after all; however—Where was I? I say, when I and Maggie are Darby and Joan together, we will talk of *you*. If she annoys me, I shall say: ‘Why didn’t you marry John, you pretty fool? He would have let you have your own way, which, as the case now is, you haven’t got.’ When conversation languishes, our model John will be quite a topic.—Come, what shall be our liquor? I have had enough, you say, and perhaps I have, of brandy—let it be champagne, then.”



““You shall drink no more to-night, Richard.”

‘But he ran by me, before I could stop him, and down the cellar stairs; I snatched up a candle, and followed him to the top of them. He knew his way to every bin blindfold, and had already a champagne bottle in his hand, and was turning to come up again.

““That wine,” cried I, “is mine, not yours; and you shall not drink it.”

‘It was true enough. Half only of what my uncle had left was his, and he had already had three-fourths of everything. I don’t rightly know why I was so determined about the wine; whether I really wished to work upon his fears once more, while he was still sober enough to listen to me, or whether my patience had been taxed beyond its powers, and I was fixed to exact my

rights at last ; but I was resolved that he should drink no more that night.

““Not drink!” cried he contemptuously: “I shall drink what I please, and, what is more, Maggie shall drink also. There is nothing that a woman will not learn of the man she loves; and nothing, if he neglects her, so likely for her to take to as liquor. How it will shock our model John, our temperance brother-in-law, who had such a high opinion of us—— You had best let me pass.”

““Not with that wine,” cried I. He had tumbled half-way up the stairs by this time, and I had come down a few steps, and stood there barring the way. For all his cold, contemptuous talk, I think he had been furious against me all along; and seeing me quite resolved to balk him of his whim, and being passionately scornful of the man who had

been his slave so long, and borne so much, he suddenly lost all control of himself. "Take that, then," cried he, and made at me with the bottle.

'I struck out in self-defence—I swear it—with my fist, and he fell backwards down the steps and on to the cellar floor. So little force had I employed, that the candle in my other hand—the right—was not put out. I ran down the steps to help him; but he was past all help. He had fallen head foremost upon the stones, and never moaned nor moved. *I, his brother, had killed him!* That was my first thought, Maggie; and my second, if that can be called so which was a part of my first, and suggested by it, was, *And I had lost you for ever.*

'It would have been the natural course, but for that circumstance (as it was

unquestionably the safe and prudent one), to have at once roused our little household, and explained what had occurred. I had done nothing, in the eye of the law, for which I had not, if not a complete defence, at least an ample palliation; moreover, it was the height of rashness to hide the matter, since, if it did come to be known, the concealment of it must needs suggest my guilt. There was apparently no choice between the two courses of action: the one was so safe and the other was so fraught with peril. Yet, for your sake—no! I will be frank here, as elsewhere; it was not for your sake, though the thought of your wretchedness, if this thing should come to be told you, weighed with me too; for my own sake, as respected you, I resolved—it was but a flash of thought, but it shaped my future—to confess

nothing, and let matters take their chance. I ran up those fatal steps, locked the cellar-door, and thrust the key underneath it: I hoped to hear it ring upon the stones beneath, but it did not do so; it lodged upon the top step. That little circumstance might, I knew, be fatal to me, for how could Richard have come by his end, with the key *there*? But it was too late to think of that now. By my own act, I had rendered explanation impossible; henceforth, there was nothing for me but duplicity and dissimulation. What mattered *that* (you are perhaps saying), to one who had imbued his hands in his brother's blood? Yet, pity me, pity me a little, Maggie, for you were the innocent cause of all!'

And she did pity him, not a little only, but from the bottom of her faithful heart.

‘*Mamma* not ky,’ besought little Willie, leaving his pictured treasures to tug at her gown; but the touch of his baby fingers was powerless to help her now: his handsome upturned face and lustrous eyes reminded her of his father, and gave her a new torture. She pitied her husband, and yet she could not forgive him: not by reason of his crime, for she acquitted him of all crime, but because of what happened afterwards. How could he, *could* he have spoken to her of love, knowing what he had done, and by what means he had been left free to win her.


‘I will not harrow up your soul by a description of how I passed that night, waiting for the dawn that was to bring dismay to all, and to one despair. I dinted my bed to make believe that I had slept in it, but sleep not only then, but

for many a night to come, was a stranger to my eyes. If I closed them but for a second, I was once more standing in the cellar, holding the candle above my head, and throwing its feeble rays upon Richard's prostrate form; once more I lifted him up, once more convinced myself that his life had fled for ever!

'These spectral fancies faded as the night melted away, only to give place to as terrible realities. I remained in my room beyond my usual hour in order that Mrs. Morden should find the letter that I had caused Richard to write, and which I had left upon the parlour table. What moments of agony, remorse, suspense, were those! In the end I had to find it for myself, to counterfeit surprise at its contents, and even to simulate annoyance and irritation. And here circumstances assisted me greatly, for, without


any violation of probability in conduct, I was enabled to cause the cellar-door to be bricked up, thus placing the discovery of Richard's fate at an indefinite distance. Every hour that elapsed after the tidings of his disappearance had once got abroad placed me on safer ground. I had only to wait long enough, and the mysterious incident would become, I knew, a mere legend, save to two persons—to me and to you. I listened with interest to the ideas and suggestions of others upon the subject, with the view of shaping my own opinions—or, rather, the expression of them—in conformity with theirs. But there was one person only whose suspicions I had the least cause to fear, namely, Dennis Blake. I knew, of course, that Richard had seen him subsequently to our first interview upon that fatal night: it was probable that he had

told him of the promise I had exacted from him, and also—when he found that I was powerless to punish him—had expressed his determination not to fulfil it : he had probably even left Blake's house with the avowed intention of returning to Rosebank that very morning and defying me. In that case, Blake would have good reason, indeed, to disbelieve my story ; and so, in fact, it turned out. But, on the other hand, Blake, who had stripped Richard of his last shilling, including the cheque for a hundred pounds I had given him at his departure, had reasons of his own for denying that his friend had visited him on the night in question ; while, much as he hated me, it never entered into his mind that I had harmed my brother. It so happened, therefore, that on the only side on which there appeared to be danger I was made secure.



Fortune had thus befriended me in two particulars, but only so far as she may be said to befriend, by gifts of land and gold, a man who has some incurable ulcer, and who would give all he had in the world, and all that he will ever acquire, only to be whole and well. First, I had placed a wall of bricks between my dead brother and the prying eyes of my fellow creatures ; but it was a wall of glass to me, and a hundred times a day I had to look through it : a frightful penance, and, moreover, one which was utterly unavailing to wipe out the sense of my offence. Secondly, accident had silenced my only possible accuser ; but there was a voice within me that could not be silenced, and which day and night cried out incessantly against me as a man-slayer who was scheming to stand in his victim's shoes ! It lied, for I was not scheming. I had

hopes—for how could I have existed without them? or, rather, faint gleams of hope, since it was now apparent that you regarded me with respect—that you might in time accept me for your husband; but I shrank from moving a finger to advance them. When your father fell ill I assisted him, and strove, secretly, to assist you; but that I would have done, Heaven knows, had my brother been alive, and you his wife. I never breathed a word, nor cast a look—you will bear me witness, Maggie—that would lead you to imagine the existence of the passion which was devouring me; for I loved you, Maggie, now that I was free to win you, more vehemently than ever; and when Remorse and Shame forgot to gnaw their prey, I was tortured with the flames of vain Desire. It was with no thought of earning your gratitude that I chastised



Dennis Blake for slandering you ; I struck him down in the heat of passion, as I would have struck down any other man who dared to sully your fair fame. If I had had time to think, I might have held my hand, not because that blow made the only man who had power to harm me my deadly enemy, but because a public quarrel upon your account would, I knew, be the very last thing to recommend me to you. Indeed, when people began to whisper that I had been your champion with interested motives, I felt that it had been fatal to my hopes. From that time I avoided you, and kept at home—great Heaven, what a home it was !—and had you yourself not come to Rosebank, and given me the opportunity of declaring my passion, it would never, I verily believe, have been revealed. Oh, Maggie! how little you thought, as you listened to

my pleading, what it was that made my air and looks so strange and unlike a lover's—what a ghastly obstacle intruded itself between my eyes and your fair face—what a dreadful Something was lying beneath our very feet!

‘Pardon me, pardon me, Maggie; think of the wretchedness I suffered then, and afterwards, and (if I live to feel) what I suffer now. It was cruel to you, I own—most cruel; but I thought that you would never know, and you had become the only thing on earth for which I lived.’

CHAPTER XI.

RETRIBUTION.

HAD Maggie listened to her dead husband's prayer, and pardoned him, or had she not? Her tears had ceased; his confession lay on her knee unnoticed, and she was staring at the wintry landscape out of doors. Presently she caught sight of the child, still intent on his book upon the floor, and snatched him up, and placed him on a chair, and the volume on a table before him. Whenever her eyes fell upon the floor, she shivered; yet she forced them to look upon it, and, after a while, prevailed

over her weakness. She sat for many a minute deep in thought, and then, with a long-drawn sigh, resumed her task.


‘Well, we were married: the dream of my past existence became a reality to me; and I was happy. You are surprised to read that word; but then you do not know—how should you, who set your affections where you did—what it is to love a being, to possess whom, so far from dissolving an illusion, is a new enchantment. I was so happy that a new source of disquiet arose within me, a terror lest my happiness should not last—lest the fatal day of discovery (which has since arrived) should dawn, and destroy it for ever! I resolved to neglect no precaution against this peril. Since our honeymoon itself had been spent at home, rumour might be supposed to have exhausted itself respecting my

unwillingness to leave Rosebank; and I resolved never to quit it even for a day. That any one in my absence should break down the cellar-wall, was in the highest degree unlikely; but I would run no risks, however small. If you had wished it, indeed, I would have gone anywhere, since to have given you pleasure was a delight I could not have denied myself, no matter at what cost; but, fortunately, you did not wish it. You were content to remain at home, and I was more than content; for wherever you were was Paradise! The remembrance of what had happened to Richard had begun to fade even with myself—to recur at longer intervals and with less of force—so that I almost hoped it would be possible in time to forget it; when suddenly you began to talk to me about his disappearance, a subject which had hitherto, as if

by common consent, been avoided by us both. Then I felt, indeed, how delusive had been that hope of my forgetting. The mention of my brother's name by the lips that had once avowed your love for him, brought every detail of that fatal act to my recollection, and I beheld it while you spoke. It seemed to have occurred but yesterday, and that the discovery of it might be made to-morrow. Above all, the sense that my brother's whitening bones lay beneath our feet, while I was listening to your talk about him, palsied my tongue, and filled my soul with horror. So intolerable, indeed, were my emotions in that scene and atmosphere, that I was compelled to retire from them, and our conversation — as you remember — was continued in the garden. To my extreme disquiet, I then discovered that you

believed Richard to have met his end by foul play, and that your suspicions rested upon Blake. I combated them as stoutly as I could—for who could be so convinced of his innocence as I—and for the better defence of him, endeavoured to convince you that my brother was still alive. This line of argument, however, had an effect natural enough, but which, in my own certainty of his death, I had forgot to calculate upon : you became intensely solicitous as to his whereabouts and well-being, and insisted upon writing to New York. You read your letter to me in the parlour, and I had to listen there to the gracious words, that I alone, of all men, knew that his eyes would never read ; to the questions that I alone, of living men, could answer ; and he, all the time, to whom they were addressed, lying so near at hand—so near, and yet so far !

‘I greatly wonder, when the reply from New York reached us, that my indifference to its arrival did not create the suspicion that I must possess the knowledge that Richard was no more. Of course I knew that the envelope could contain only your own letter, and something revolted within me against affecting to believe that it could be a communication from the man that I had slain (although by misadventure) with my own hand. However, that incident passed away without any serious effect upon you ; indeed, having done your best to pierce the mystery of Richard’s disappearance, your solicitude about him seemed to relax, and once more tranquillity began to gather about my life, like mosses about a stone. Indeed, I was even happier than before, for the blessed sense that my devotion was




slowly but surely winning its reward from you—a reward it had never counted upon, for all the service of my life was yours, at all events—began to dawn upon me with an inexpressible brightness. I thought, poor fool! that I had been forgiven all, and was henceforth to be blessed always.


‘I have said that even yet, when you spoke to me of Richard, I was at once suddenly awakened from my dreams of happiness, and brought face to face with ruin; imagine, then, my horror when, after weeks of silence concerning him, during which I had well-nigh forgotten that his unburied bones lay beneath our very roof, I was awakened by that noise in the cellar! There is a verse in the Scripture which describes how fear came upon a man who beheld some dread vision of the night—“a trembling which

made all his bones to shake: a spirit passed before his face, and the hair of his flesh stood up;" and such was my case when I heard that sound; only in place of a spirit, I beheld Richard as I had left him, dead. He had been lying with that cellar for his grave for more than two years, and now he had risen to denounce me! Such was my terror-stricken thought, when you, too, Maggie, were awakened by the noise, and questioned me about it. I had been too terrified to move until you spoke, but the sound of your voice at once inspired me with the courage of desperation. The fear of beholding Richard's ghost was overcome by the greater fear of exciting your suspicions of what made me afraid, which might result in losing *you*. I resolved, if the noise should come again, that I would force myself to arise and face

its cause ; but, as it happened, it came no more on that occasion ; and in the morning early, I went down, and removed the great picture in the parlour from its nail, and made pretence that it had fallen in the night, and that the noise of its fall was what had disturbed us. The next night, however, we were roused again, and this time a sort of fury seized me, that did not admit of fear, and I arose, and ran out of doors, and looking through the cellar grating, saw a light, and heard the strokes of a pickaxe ; and guessing from whence they came, I went to the woodhouse, and through the subterranean passage, and came upon Dennis Blake at the very moment when he had found my secret out. How he came to discover it you must needs know by this time, for he has done his worst, I know, whatever that may be ; so I need



not speak of that. For one single instant, when I beheld him standing in the cellar with the light of the lantern thrown upon my brother's body, and already, as I felt, master of my future life, by whose permission alone I might live on, and at whose word I might be parted from what was dearer far than life, *yourself*, the temptation was strong upon me to become a murderer indeed. He read it in my face, and stood upon his guard with his pickaxe, crying : " One is enough, John Milbank ; you shall not kill me, as you have killed your brother." It was a perilous speech for him ; but I thought of you, Maggie, who, since you were my wife, must needs be disgraced by any crime of mine, and I let him live to be my Tyrant. After that, I was not only powerless in his hands, but I had no force even of my own, either



without or within. The whole edifice of my life had fallen—from such a height too, for had I not become convinced you loved me!—and was shattered to atoms. Name and fame, present means and future gains, my home and hearth—all lay at this villain's pleasure. Above all, your happiness was in his power, and by one word of his could be utterly destroyed. All this, too, had occurred at a moment when I had imagined myself quite secure, as safe from the law as my conscience was void of the guilt which the law would now impute to me. I saw myself torn from your arms to the prison, or perhaps even the gallows; at all events, from your arms for ever. Can you wonder, Maggie, that, in the supreme agony of that moment (though I knew it not until you had yourself perceived it), I became an old

man before my time—that the winter that had fallen on my heart in its mid-summer, and withered it, turned my hair to snow !

‘ Blake comprehended my position only too well, and pushed his advantage to the uttermost. If I could only have gained time, could have persuaded him to leave the house, and return at daylight, I would have removed Richard’s body, buried it elsewhere, and defied him to say his worst of me ; but he was too cunning by accede to any such proposal. I told him the whole truth of how my brother had come by his end, just as I have told you, except (you may be sure) that I never breathed your sacred name to him ; and I verily believe that I convinced him. But he only shrugged his shoulders, and observed coldly that whether my brother had



been murdered or not was a matter which in no way affected the terms he was about to dictate to me as the price of his silence. It might be a satisfaction to my own conscience to believe that the affair had been an accident: perhaps it was so, though he must say the circumstances were very suspicious, so suspicious, indeed, that there was no doubt as to the view which the law would take of the case, if once it should have cognizance of it. It was for our common interest, however, he said, that the matter should be kept secret, and he could keep a secret, if it was made worth his while. Thus he went on, as we stood together in the parlour that dreadful night, while I searched my mind in vain for schemes of safety. He had, in fact, even a stronger hold on me than he supposed. If once I was

denounced, even though the law should acquit me, a greater punishment than the worst it could have inflicted would be mine, since I knew you would never more abide with one who had shed Richard's blood. . In my utter hopelessness and despair, I even stooped to the humiliation of appealing to the villain's mercy—the mercy of Dennis Blake ! Whereupon, he plainly told me that he had no such commodity for any man whose interests were antagonistic to his own, but least of all for me. There was no love lost, said he, between him and any of his fellow-creatures, but that he hated one man worse than all the rest, and that man was John Milbank. When that mark on his forehead—they had told him, in the hospital, he must needs carry it to his grave—was worn out, he might perhaps forgive the hand that

caused it, but not till then ; so I had best leave mercy out of the question. Then he proceeded to state the price of his silence and of my ransom ; of which let it suffice to say, since he will never profit by it by one farthing, that it was but little short of utter ruin.

‘During all this time, I had still the thought that he would leave me before daylight, when I might secretly put away the evidence of that seeming crime upon which alone he based his power over me. Cruel, therefore, as his terms were, I professed to accept them, and looked to see him thereupon depart.

“But, my friend, we have not got this down in your handwriting!” said he grimly.

“What matters?” said I. “It is not difficult to remember what you have left to me, and, therefore, what you have

exacted; and to put such an agreement on paper, though more perilous, would not be more binding than in words.”

““That is true; but I was not referring to the agreement at all, which, as you say, is safe enough. What I want is an acknowledgment of the circumstance that has happened to-night—the finding of your brother’s body in the cellar, and so on. You may explain how it came there as you please.”

‘Then my heart sank within me, indeed—for what he demanded was, in fact, nothing less than a confession; and, if once possessed of that, he was my master, indeed, for ever! Then suddenly a thought, which at the time seemed to have winged its way from Heaven itself, flashed on my brain. In obedience to his request, I got out some paper from my desk, but contrived (and

my agitation and excitement must have rendered the accident natural enough) to upset the ink.

““ You must have ink elsewhere,” said he sternly.

““ Yes,” said I, “there is some upstairs: I will fetch it.”

‘I resolved to write out what he required in the ink invented by your father, and trust to its virtues to make me once more a free man. I came up to your room, as you remember, and you gave me a bottle. What you must have thought of such a demand, at such a time, I cannot guess; my whole mind was intent on getting that villain from under our roof, and, meanwhile, could apply itself to nothing else. I wrote out what he wanted; and when he had read it over carefully, he nodded approval, and put it in his pocket. He


asked me for fifty pounds—just as one asks the banker with whom one has a balance to cash a cheque—and saying that that would do for the next ten days, when he would call again, and when I must be ready with a good lump sum, he left me.'

CHAPTER XII.

NEW YEAR'S EVE.


‘I CREPT up to my room, I know not how, and lay down by your side, wife, but feeling as though half the world were already between us. It was too near the break of dawn to admit of my removing the cause of my ruin from where it lay ; and once more it ceaselessly presented itself before my eyes, not as I had seen it, but even in more hideous shape—endowed with a ghastly life, and pointing to me with outstretched arm, as though denouncing me—as, indeed, it had done—as a murderer ! Your proposal that I

should keep my room for a time, by reason of the change in my appearance, was not displeasing to me ; for I felt that every face that looked on mine must read my secret in it, and even your own dear presence was insupportable to me. I longed for night to come, that I might go about the dreadful work that I had set myself to do. As to telling you one syllable of what had happened, that was impossible ; to have mentioned Dennis Blake would at once, I knew, have turned your thoughts to Richard, and then—— I did not dare to think what then ! I swear to you that, sooner than confront the idea of losing you, I preferred that my mind should keep company with that other haunting image—my dead brother. Oh, how could that wise writer whom we once read together have said, “There are possibilities which our minds shrink



from too completely for us to fear them !” I shrank, indeed, from this one, but it was because I feared it, as the wicked on their deathbed fear the grave. The day came to its end at last ; and in the night —while you slept fast, outworn, I doubt not, with anxieties and fears, yet spared as yet from knowing what I knew—I rose, and went out to the tool-house, and by the passage that Blake had made, into the cellar. Had ever man, I wonder, since the earth was made, so dreadful a task to do in it as I had ? Yet I did it. I took Richard’s body away—what horrors are hidden beneath those common words ! and buried it—no matter where : where it will not be found till earth gives up its dead. That done, I had some hopes of safety, and could think a little, and with calmness. If only the ink in which I had written my own accu-

sation should perform its office, there was now but Blake's bare word to hurt me—his against mine: the word of a cheat and scoundrel against an honest man's. In that appalling hour, a tale of which you had once spoken to me recurred to my mind—for nothing that you ever said have I forgotten—respecting one who, being made captive by a savage tribe, was doomed to death, unless, as he had foretold, the Great Spirit should interfere on his behalf with some prodigy upon the fatal day. An eclipse had been predicted for that date in a penny almanac which he chanced to have about him, and to that event—whether calculated by science, or merely the haphazard guess of some empiric, he knew not—the prisoner had to trust. As it happened, the thing took place, and he was saved. And this was



now my case, except that I had better reason to believe in the seeming miracle. In ten days' time, when that villain came again, he might find me free.

'I need not tell you, Maggie, how this poor hope was put to flight by your own innocent hands: how you tracked me in the garden, out of pure love and duty—as I went to lay my spade and pickaxe by, and then confronted me in the house—still for my good, sweetheart!—with the charge of compassing the death of Dennis Blake. I had no thought of harming him, yet it was better to let you think I had, than that you should hear the truth: yet even the truth must now be but a little way off, I knew. Now I had owned that I meant to kill him, you must needs believe Blake when he told his tale—for if it was not true, why should I have sought his


life? I could no longer defy him, so far as *you* were concerned, though I might defy the law; and what was this small gain as compared with that huge loss! Even though acquitted by others, I could not stay to read repugnance and abhorrence in your eyes; I do not say the conviction of my guilt, for I have proved my innocence: still, I did kill him.'

Ay, there was the blot: Maggie could have forgiven all but that, nay, even that itself, perchance, but could have forgotten it never. It was well in him to have left her; she confessed she could never have taken that hand in hers again which had struck Richard down and slain him. Yet was not John dead too, and in a manner also slain; and did not *his* blood also cry out for justice, the justice she alone could give it! She read on.

‘I did not dare to say good-bye to you, Maggie : my heart would have burst asunder, and I should have perished at your feet—a guilty man, as you must then have needs believed. I resolved to write all my story out, and then to leave home before the dawn—I cared not whither. It was an easy task, for I had conned it a thousand times ; and here it is. Whatever steps he takes, no harm can befall you now from Dennis Blake. If, however, my departure has caused him to return to Rosebank before the appointed day, and to reveal to you what he knows, then it must needs be that he has convinced you. Thence it is that I shall write upon this paper : To be read when I am dead, or *when you have lost your faith in me*. It will be no blame to you if you have done so, dearest ; yet you will now have read the explanation,

point by point, of all that happened, and the whole story of my wretched life. I hope and pray that before it meets your eyes I shall be dead, since, being dead, my tale will be more like to move your soul to pity and forgiveness. Oh, think not how I have sinned, but how I have suffered!—that many a time I could have slain myself, but for the thought that loss of life was loss of you; that I would do so now, but for the word I gave, which, being passed to you, is sacred and inviolable! I have sinned, I know—a sin that may, indeed, be even unpardonable, since it was committed against yourself. It was base and selfish in me, when Richard had perished as he did, to suffer you to wed me: so much of guilt I own to; for the rest, Heaven is my judge, and it is just!

‘ Forget me, darling!—O Maggie,



Maggie! to think that I should live to utter such a prayer!—forget me: that is the best that I can wish for you!’

Those were his last words; so ended the sad story of John Milbank’s life. ‘Forget me,’ to the woman he had lived for, died for! Never yet, perhaps, has the woman existed who could have forgotten under the like circumstances; or, if such has existed, it was not Maggie. She had forgiven him all that was hers to forgive him—his trespass against herself; yet she would never forget him, or cease to honour his unhappy memory. What touched her most of all was his humility—his taking it for granted that she would have made no sacrifices to rescue his name from shame. He had not stated what cruel terms had been imposed upon him by Blake, ‘since he will never profit

by them ;' and again, 'No harm can befall you now through Dennis Blake.' He had supposed that anything that villain could have said against himself, or caused others to say, would be of 'no harm' to her. At how low a rate had he been content to count her love for *him*, while lavishing on *her* the treasures of his heart's devotion ! That she could never have lived with him after she had come to the knowledge of what had happened to Richard, she admitted to herself even now ; but she confessed her husband's worth. She recognized, without flinching, what manner of man he had been on whom she had thrown away her love in youth, and what manner of man was *this* one. She wondered, with him, how she could have clung to such a worthless weed, while this flower of manhood was pining for her ; how the

devotion of the one could have counted for so little, and the admiration of the other for so much: but she had gained her wisdom at the cost of both their lives. One thought alone gave her comfort: she had opened the packet because she knew that he was dead, not because she had lost faith in him. She had felt all along, notwithstanding Blake's statement, and many a fact more or less in corroboration of it, that, somehow or other, her husband would be proved guiltless—that he was incapable of guilt—and she rejoiced that her conviction had been independent of this proof. She had never lost faith in him; but she had it now more strongly than she ever had; she believed his tale, she pitied him, and she loved him.

‘What dat, *mamma*; Granny’s hair?’

Little Willie, tired at last with his

picture-book, had been watching her as she broke the seal of the little packet that the ship-captain had sent to her containing the lock of hair cut from her dead husband's head.

She lifted the child on to her knees, and caressed him with inexpressible tenderness.

'No, darling,' sighed she; 'it is not Granny's hair, though it is white enough to be so.'

How sharp must have been the agony that had blanched it; what a memento of a wasted life it was! He was gone out of the reach of her pity; but, thank Heaven! she had baffled his enemy, and his memory, untarnished by public disgrace, was still left to her to revere and honour. For its sake, she felt that she could still do much, could battle for it—if need were, and notwithstanding what her

present victory had cost her—to the end. To one thing only, she felt herself unequal—namely, to remain, even for a single night, beneath that dreadful roof. That very afternoon, therefore, when the early dusk had fallen, she put on cloak and bonnet, and, with the child, set forth to her father's house. The old man was overjoyed to see her; and her arrival seemed to him, as indeed it well might do, the most natural thing in the world.

‘I am glad, dear Maggie, that you have come hither,’ said he tenderly, ‘and do not spend this wretched New-year's Eve alone at home.’

‘I have come to spend not only New-year's Eve with you,’ she answered, ‘but the new year, and all new years that God may please to send us; for I have no home now except the old one!’

CHAPTER XIII.

PERPLEXITIES.

It was one of the advantages consequent upon her having been 'buried alive,' as the Hilton folks had designated her quiet married life, although they had owned John Milbank to be 'the Best of Husbands,' that Maggie was not now pestered with those conventional calls of sympathy and shallow expressions of condolence which so often add a new trouble to the sense of bereavement. 'Withdraw thy foot from thy neighbour's house, lest he be weary of thee,' was an injunction written surely with

especial reference to those would-be comforters, who at such times disturb with well-meant commonplaces our thoughts of Death and Loss. In Maggie's case, such visitors would have been an infliction indeed, and something worse, since itching ears and prying eyes were sources of positive danger. Her husband's secret had been preserved so far, but it was by no means secure; and it behoved her still to be on her guard, and wary with her tongue, in reply to all questions concerning him. The few persons, however, whose intimacy permitted of their visiting her, loved her too well, or respected her grief too much, to indulge their curiosity upon that subject. Her father, reticent by nature, was too glad to find his daughter once more making her home beneath his roof, to pry into the causes which had induced

her to leave her own; and, indeed, it seemed natural enough that Rosebank, with its now doubly sad and mysterious associations, should be distasteful to her. It had, in fact, become so hateful to her, that if she had not been absolutely obliged to do so, for business reasons, she would probably never have set foot in it again. It was arranged that it was to be let unfurnished, this method of disposing of it appearing to her upon the whole as the safer—the less likely to give a handle to Rumour, than the dismantling of the place, and letting it go to ruin, as she would otherwise have preferred to do. Even as it was, certain precautions had to be taken, the consideration of which pressed upon her with urgency. The existence of the underground passage between the tool-house and the cottage was as yet

unknown save to two persons beside herself, and one of them bound in heavy recognizances to keep it secret. But when the house should become occupied by another tenant, the fact must necessarily be discovered, and made public, to form the groundwork of a hundred surmises and suggestions, all more or less perilous, and one of which, though by hap-hazard, might be fatal. It was essential, therefore, secretly to remove the traces of Dennis Blake's burglarious entry into the cellar; and in order to accomplish this, she sought the aid of the only other man who was already acquainted with the fact, and to whom she was already indebted for her present security—namely, Mr. Inspector Brain.

It was dangerous, for she was not without an uneasy suspicion that that

astute officer was not so thoroughly convinced of the falsehood of Blake's story as he had affected to be; but no alternative presented itself. He was the only man who *could* help her. Moreover, if he had done her so good a turn out of pity for her miserable condition, as well as because the weight of evidence had lain upon her side, that consideration would weigh with him still. After long cogitation, she accordingly sent for him to her father's house.


'Mr. Brain,' said she, 'I have purposely hitherto forbore to express to you my sense of the infinite service you have rendered to me and mine, in the hope that my poor husband would himself return to suitably acknowledge it. That hope is now destroyed.'

Here she broke down, not by design, as some women would have done, but

because it was almost the first time that she had given utterance to any word respecting the dead man.

‘Pray, pray, don’t mention it! I beg you not to distress yourself; your taking on so, madam, cannot but be most injurious to your health,’ urged the polite inspector. Perhaps he *had* entertained the idea in private that there was really something more ‘fishy’ about that Rosebank affair than he had professed to believe. Under that tightly-fitting professional costume he wore, indeed, a very warm heart—hard and resolute against scoundrels of all kinds, but tender towards lovely women in distress. It is not an exceptional state of things by any means. The very last time that a beautiful murderess was brought from Ultima Thule (or thereabouts) to the metropolis by a sergeant of police, it

is on record that that official, notwithstanding that he was of mature age and a married man, was so wrought upon by the charms of his prisoner that, though faithful to his trust, he cut his own throat when that fair lady was eventually *sus. per coll.*, through remorse at having been the means of her capture: and Maggie, who was no murderess, nor the wife of one—for Mr. Brain, it must be mentioned in fairness to his integrity, never thought *that*—was very beautiful, and her woes had without doubt touched the inspector nearly. They did not now touch him less, as she sat before him in her widow's weeds, not sobbing with passionate vehemence (as he could bear to see women do, or he could never have won his inspectorship, or done a day's duty), but dropping the silent tears which she would fain have restrained,



and for which she seemed, as it were, to apologise. She was 'a lady every inch of her,' as he afterwards confidentially affirmed, and knew how to treat a man with courtesy, without offering him something to drink.

'If I have never spoken of recompense Mr. Brain,' she went on, 'it was, believe me, through the fear of offending you, and also lest such an offer should afford the least suggestion of a bribe.'

The inspector turned scarlet; his conscience, in matters of duty, was tolerably sensitive, and perhaps, as we have said, was slightly pricked; but here the natural delicacy of Maggie's character, shown in her embarrassed looks and tone, stood in better stead with him than the feigning of art could have done; it was so evident that she was feeling pain on his account, not fear upon her own.

Mr. Brain felt that it was a moment when discipline must be maintained, or that it would be all over with him. 'I only did my duty, madam,' observed he gruffly.

'I know it, Mr. Brain, and I am only about to do what I feel to be mine. It is not unusual, as I understand, for private persons to recompense gentlemen of your calling for your professional services; and though I feel that any pecuniary payment will still leave me your debtor as regards the kindness and consideration you have shown to one in my unfortunate position, you must allow me to acknowledge it so far as I can. But for your prompt and sagacious behaviour with respect to Blake, my husband's memory might at this moment be stained with a charge as foul as false—the murder of a brother for whom, as I well know, he has made,

through life, enormous sacrifices, and against whom he has never imagined evil. Such a service to me is priceless, and but ill represented by this note for fifty pounds. The acceptance of it, I need not say, leaves you perfectly free to take any further steps which your duty may suggest to you ; it is but a recognition of the past.'

'It is a pretty tidy sum, madam,' remonstrated Mr. Brain. 'Why a ten-pun' note would have been handsome.'

'I am sure you will not distress me, Mr. Brain, by rejecting it. However, if you think yourself overpaid, you can still further assist me, if you will. I have sent for you to-day, I own, not wholly to give myself this pleasure ; I need your help to conclude the matter which you have wrought thus far so successfully. If the existence of that

underground passage to the cellar at Rosebank should come to be known—as it needs must be, when the house is let—it will set gossiping tongues at work, which Blake's malice may easily render mischievous. Is it not possible to employ some trustworthy person—not belonging to this part of the country——'

'Certainly, certainly, madam,' interrupted the inspector, secretly relieved, perhaps, at the nature of her demand, which was, after all, only the completion of the service he had already performed. 'I can send for a bricklayer from London, who will close the tunnel at both ends, do the job thoroughly in a couple of hours, and never ask the reason why.'

'If you will cause that to be done,' said Maggie quietly, 'so soon as I have taken measures, by getting the servants out of the way, for its being accomplished

privately, and will be so good as to let me know the cost, you will be conferring an obligation on me only second to that I have already incurred.'

The request was reasonable enough, since all that had hitherto been done to baffle Blake might become mere loss of time and trouble unless it were granted; but, nevertheless, the inspector hesitated; the proposition, now that he came to reflect upon it, involved such an absolute partisanship in the matter, made him so art and part in it, that he could not help asking himself: 'If there really is anything wrong in this Rosebank job, shall not I, Inspector Brain, become an accessory in it after the fact, by obliging this good lady?'

Maggie read his thoughts almost as quickly as they flashed upon him.

'If it is going beyond your duties,


Mr. Brain, I beg you not to stretch them upon my account. If you will only give me the address of the workman upon whom you said you can rely, and even that in confidence——’

‘Very good, ma’am; yes, you can write it down at once, if you please: it is best not to put my hand to it, for, like your husband, I have enemies of my own, who would be glad to have an opportunity to do me an ill turn in the force; and you needn’t tell this man that it was I who recommended you; be so good as to say it was a friend.’

‘And it *was* a friend, I am sure,’ said Maggie earnestly, and with a smile that shot right home to the inspector’s heart. He felt himself a brute to have experienced any scruples in obliging her; and something worse to have suspected her to be connected, however remotely,

with a crime. So this arrangement was put into effect, and so far as Rosebank was concerned, Maggie felt secure. One possibility, however, never ceased to haunt her, that somehow, some day, the remains of the unhappy Richard should be discovered and identified. Where John had buried them, she knew not; but she had seen him that night, with his spade, come from the direction of the spinney, and in it she pictured to herself their unhallowed resting-place. It could not have been very deep, for it was winter-time, and the ground like iron, and was it not certain, that one day, perhaps soon, perhaps after the lapse of years, the terrible secret should be laid bare, notwithstanding all her precautions! Nay, if such should be the case, and Mr. Brain should be alive when the discovery was made, would not those very precau-


tions be, to his mind, the proof of her husband's guilt, and of her own conviction of it! And if, on the other hand, the inspector should die, would not Dennis Blake, now doubly made her foe, be once more at liberty to prey upon her fears, and, by instituting an investigation on his own account, to make his power felt indeed! As soon as one source of danger was done away, in short, poor Maggie became the victim of new apprehensions, which, it seemed, were never to end until all should be revealed; there would be no further cause of fear to her, only because the worst that could befall had happened. The criminal, she had read, is never secure; and she, who was neither criminal nor cognizant of any crime, was doomed, it appeared, like him, to dwell in the constant dread of discovery. Her very faith would, at times,



faint and fail beneath this load of care ; for, could the government of the world be just, she asked herself, when the innocent was thus made to suffer like the guilty ? Nay, how could she reconcile with justice the whole tenor of her unhappy husband's blameless life, nourished as it had been upon vain hopes, that had had their fruition only by an accident, which itself had overwhelmed him with ruin and despair ! How was it, how could it have been permitted, that the crime—nay, not the crime—that the impulse of a moment, should have brought the fruit of a well-spent life to nought, and withered such a goodly tree !

In vain she tried to comfort herself with the reflection that John was happy now at last, and compensated for his life of unrest and self-denial ; and that presently, in Heaven's good time, they

would meet again, with this Shadow no more between them! Maggie was a good woman, but it is given but to few mortals to have their convictions in the happy Future so firmly set as to outweigh the miserable Present. She even ventured to use the argument of comparison with respect to Richard. If all this wretchedness had not happened, would she not have had to endure other miseries, as bad, or almost as bad, as Richard's wife, the wife of a sot, a forger—and the worst of forgers, one who had made use of an innocent hand to perform his crime—faithless, dishonoured in her own eyes, and perhaps successful in his threatened scheme of teaching her the vices to which he was himself the slave! As Richard's wife, in short, might she not have been even as miserable as was his brother's widow? An argument



surely more creditable to our humanity than that which would extract consolation from a comparison with the misfortunes of *others*; but yet one that failed to console her—for to experience consolation, one must at least feel that the catastrophe has happened, that Fate for that time (for, alas, she is insatiable!) has worked her utmost malice; and not, as Maggie felt, that the worst was still impending. But for *that*, indeed, her father's devotion, and little Willie's demands upon her loving service, might in time have won her from the past; but from these dreadful possibilities of the future they could never win her. A thoughtless word, an idle question, could at any moment array them before her eyes; and when even **Martha** **Linch**—whose perceptions of **what** **sympathy** demanded had been **shown to be most**

delicate, and who had restrained that usually unruly member, her tongue, in connection with all that had happened, in a manner that the engraver had pronounced to be miraculous—asked one day to look at that lock of hair belonging to dear Mr. John, which the captain had sent home, Maggie was overwhelmed with confusion. The hair was in a closed locket round her neck, but she mechanically placed her hand upon it, as though Martha's eyes could have pierced the gold. The idea suggested to her by little Willie's remark, of pretending that what the locket contained was her father's hair, did indeed strike her; but she rejected it, as likely to lead to contradiction and complications; and she had absolutely nothing to say, save to refuse her companion's request. To have shown her the dear relic, would neces-

sarily have excited question and comment, for when Martha had last seen John, his hair was brown as the filbert; and yet not to show it must have seemed a strange thing also. Luckily, Martha Linch, being one who never took offence, but was always fearful of offending, was herself the apologist in this instance; but Maggie thought, with a shudder, how much worse might have been her difficulty had it occurred with some one else.

This was only one example of the perplexities of her unhappy position. It seemed that it must behove her to be ever on the watch lest her tongue should trip, ever wearing the shield upon her arm, to turn not only the shaft of malice, but the arrow, shot at a venture, from the defenceless memory of the dead. Worse than all, she felt herself chained

to Hilton, and the neighbourhood of the roof she most abhorred ; for, in case any discovery should take place, how necessary was it that she should be on the spot, to stamp the first flicker of suspicion out, which else would grow and grow, like flame itself, till it defied all efforts to subdue it.



CHAPTER XIV.

THE PLAN OF THE ESTATE.


OF all documents in which the mind of man is visible, there is none perhaps so significant of their writers as their Will. All other indentures and agreements are more or less of a temporary nature, or may be abrogated by change of circumstances, but a man's will is his very last act of all, not to be made public till he has deceased, and become indifferent to the opinion of his fellow-creatures, and in it, therefore, he pleases himself alone, and shows his nature as it is. And thus John Milbank's will was proved to be the

very reflex of his own disposition : clear concise, decisive, without condition, or even suggestion, and, in short, the very opposite of what old Matthew Thurle's had been. It left (with the exception of a legacy to Mrs. Morden, sufficient to provide for her future needs) his whole property unconditionally to 'Margaret, his beloved wife.' There was no mention of Richard's name in the document, but the impossibility of proving his demise was, after all, of little moment, since abundant proof was found among his brother's papers that he had become already indebted to John for more than the value of his share of the business that was nominally carried on in their joint names. So well had this prospered, however, since John had been relieved from the dead-weight of the other's idleness and the drain of his extravagances,

that enough was left to leave Maggie handsomely provided for.

The Best of Husbands, it was remarked, had deserved his reputation even in that crucial particular in which so many excellent mates are found to fall short: it is not unusual to discover in his last testament the first evidence that a husband has any will of his own at all; and it sometimes turns out to be a pretty strong one. But John Milbank had been consistent to the last; his conduct in the matter was generally approved of—certainly by the ladies—more than any other feature in his career: and it was assumed that Maggie Thorne, in rejecting Thomas Idle in favour of Francis Goodchild had shown she knew upon which side her bread was buttered. That the furniture of Rosebank was within a few months disposed of without reserve,

did not surprise these gossips: they did not give the widow much credit for sentiment with respect to domestic associations; but what did excite their wonder was, Why, 'with all that money,' she should be content to still live on in the house which had sufficed for her home when she had toiled for daily bread? In Mitchell Street, however, she remained, and in it her father still followed his old pursuits, not, of course, from necessity, but because they were a labour of love. In the same little arbour in that humble garden on the leads, in which, but four years ago, she had accepted Richard Milbank as her future husband, she was sitting one summer morning, when Mr. Linch called in to say that a purchaser had at last been found for Rosebank. Though she had expected, and even



wished for this announcement, it gave her a momentary thrill of fear; nothing, indeed, remained to be discovered there, while its continuance upon her hands was, of course, a considerable pecuniary loss; and yet to part with it seemed like giving up a sacred trust.

‘The party proposes to take the whole estate,’ said Mr. Lynch, ‘so that you will have no further trouble about it: that spinney, and the gravel-pit, let me tell you, have hitherto been sadly in our way—— But there, I daresay you did not even know that you were possessed of those undesirable properties.’


‘Yes; I knew it,’ said Maggie faintly, for the mention of the spinney had turned her sick at heart. Supposing this new tenant should proceed to grub it up, instead of merely disposing of the

brushwood, as old Matthew Thurle had done, and her husband after him, what might not be brought to light!

‘Well, at all events, I have brought you the plan of the estate, with every feature of it indicated, so that you may know exactly what you are going to part with.’

‘Perhaps I shall not part with it,’ said Maggie quietly, taking the plan, which he had unrolled, from his hands, and regarding it attentively, though more to conceal her own emotions than from any interest in the details.

‘Not part with it, Mrs. Milbank?’ snapped the little lawyer. ‘Why, this is worse than anything I could have believed of the unbusiness ways of women! It was at your own request, since you preferred to live in this den of a—— I mean, in this very inferior



residence, rather than in your charming cottage, that I advertised the place for sale; and now that I have, with great difficulty, secured a purchaser, and on terms, too, that, let me tell you, are, in my opinion, a fancy price, you say: "I shall not part with it," after all !'

'Nay; I said "Perhaps," Mr. Linch,' said Maggie with a forced smile. 'Pray, give me a little time; let me have an hour or two to make up my mind about this matter.'

'But you have had plenty of time to do that already.'

'I know I have, Mr. Linch; and I daresay I appear very foolish——'

'Well, no, not foolish.' He was a plain-spoken man, and had shown himself to be so in old times to Maggie, on more than one occasion: but when one is addressing a well-dowered young widow,

one is bound to be more careful in one's choice of adjectives, than in speaking to a girl who has to earn her own living with her fingers. 'I don't say foolish, but only a little unreasonable. However, I have business in this neighbourhood, and I'll call again in half-an-hour for your decision.'

'Please to leave the plan with me.'

'By all means, though I am afraid that will not help you much.'

Whether it helped her or not, Maggie's eyes, so soon as she was alone, were riveted upon it. It was a well-executed document of the kind enough, with every object clearly marked out, and its name neatly printed over it. Every little hillock and depression was shadowed forth; woodland and meadow, and garden-ground, were each indicated the one from the other. Perhaps it reminded

her of some of the work of her own hands, at the time it had been necessary for her to use them with similar deftness and particularity; but at all events, over this plan she pored, with thoughtful face, till Mr. Linch returned. 'Well,' said he, not very graciously, 'what is the last fancy, Mrs. Milbank? Are we to hold or sell?'

'The fancy has gone, Mr. Linch, if it ever existed,' returned she; 'you doubtless know best what ought to be done, and, therefore, I leave the matter in your hands.'

'Then my advice, Mrs. Milbank, is, to close with this offer at once; for we may wait long enough before we meet with such another one. Why, with this money, you can buy a place in some beautiful part of the country—anywhere would surely be better for your father

and little Willie than this stifling house in Mitchell Street, — and “live happy ever afterwards” as the story-books say; at all events, I have your consent to sell.’

The lawyer then hurried away, lest his client should once more exhibit symptoms of change of purpose, filled with philosophic reflections upon the incapability of even the most sensible of women for knowing their own minds.

Yet Maggie’s apparent vacillation had not been without cause. She was ignorant of business, it is true, and had never experienced that interest in her own property which causes most men (though not all) to investigate it with such particularity. When her eyes therefore, fell upon the plan of the Rosbank estate, she learnt for the first time that in the centre of that little wo -

which had so dread an interest for her was a limekiln; and as she read that word, a certain conviction had flashed upon her. She remembered that the spade which John had used that night, and which she had found in the tool-house, had been stained with whitish earth, which she now recognised for quicklime. Moreover, she called to mind John's expression respecting what he had put away, that 'not until the earth gives up its dead,' would it ever again be seen of men. Those words, she now reflected, ought to have sufficed her, since she had never known him to speak falsely in the least matter, or in the greatest; but with this confirmation of them before her eyes, she felt indeed secure. What a sport of circumstances is our poor humanity! How immense the consequence to us that arises from

what to others are trifles light as air !
That night, a mere dot upon a map had
given Maggie greater comfort than if she
had been presented with the fee-simple
of a county !


CHAPTER XV.

IN THE FOREST.

It is twelve years since the eligible offer, upon which Mr. Lynch so congratulated his client, was made for Rosebank, and accepted, and almost the same period since the widow of John Milbank departed from Hilton, to take up her residence, even its keenest gossips knew not where, except that it was far afield. The locality of her new home is, in fact, only known to two of her old neighbours, her lawyer and his sister. It is in the heart of the New Forest in Hampshire. The house is but

little larger than the old cottage, within whose walls so many strange incidents have occurred, and like it, this summer evening, it shows like a bower of roses, so thickly is its garden planted with that flower. A veranda runs round its front, in which old Herbert Thorne is sitting in an invalid-chair, conversing in a low voice with one who is to us a stranger. The engraver is very feeble now, but his mind is still clear, and he enjoys existence as few men of his age can boast of doing. His companion, his junior by some ten years, and who is the clergyman of the parish, regards him from time to time with an interest that is evidently personal. For the most part he listens, while the other speaks.

‘I attribute it mainly,’ says he, ‘to a temperate youth, a comparatively early




marriage, and, especially, that my life has been unconnected with any startling occurrences. It has followed on so evenly, so wholly without incident or excitement, that I miss nothing the absence of which is wont to make old age so irksome. Above all, except at one time, when my first illness overtook me, I have never suffered from anxiety. I enjoy the inexpressible comfort—the want of which makes fathers old before their time—of knowing that when I am gone my dear ones will not have material cause to miss me. Maggie will regret her father, Willie his grandfather, but they will neither have to mourn their breadwinner. That is a great consolation, Mr. Gresham, and I thank God for it. Willie's going to sea is my only trouble—nor would even that distress me—

for it is better that the boy should have his way—were it not for his mother's sake.'

The rector did not answer, save by a warning pressure of the old man's hand.

Two figures were slowly crossing the lawn in front of them, engaged in earnest converse—the one, a delicate-featured woman, dark and pale, of matured, but still exquisite beauty; and the other, a lad of fourteen or fifteen years, upon whose shoulder her arm lovingly rested. Rather under, than over the average height of boys of his own age, his frame was exceptionally sturdy and well-built; his bronzed, frank face, surmounted by brown, curling hair, showed the picture of health, but his eyes were now cast upon the ground in tender sorrow. It was no shame to his manliness that they were moist, with



the thought of his leaving his mother on the morrow for his first voyage. When her gaze was not fixed upon him, it rested not upon the glorious prospect of wooded vale and upland that lay immediately beneath them, the solitary, far-spreading oaks, the clumps of beech, the herds of deer amidst the fern, but wandered far to the horizon's verge, where glittered a silver streak, which was the sea.

‘It was a natural wish, dear Willie,’ she is saying, ‘and I do not blame you for it; nor even would I have it otherwise, if I could. There are fewer temptations to evil in a sailor’s life, they say, than on land; you have a restless spirit, which never would be satisfied with a farmer’s life, such as I, in my selfishness, would have chosen for you.’

The young lad smiled. ‘*Your* selfish-

ness, mother!' interrupted he, and kissed her hand. The tone, the air, the manner, were the perfection of graceful tenderness and appreciation.

'How like, how like!' she murmured to herself, not as mothers who congratulate themselves upon their children's love, but with a sigh of bitter meaning. 'Idleness, my darling,' she went on, 'does for none of us: it would teach even you in time to think of nothing but your own pleasures, and in them to forget those who have no pleasure save in you. Your nature—though do not think, Willie, that I wish it altered—is impressionable to a fault, and though it wrings my heart to lose you—and for so long, so long!—I feel that it is better that you should go.'

'Am I like my father, mother?' asked the boy softly.

‘Yes, oh yes!’ she said.

‘Yet not in disposition, surely, since I have heard grandpapa say that he was so quiet, and steady, and not at all given to change.’

‘So he was dear,’ answered she hastily, and with a quick glance of terror at his downcast face. ‘I was speaking only of your looks. Shall we go to the hillock, and sit down awhile for the last time? I shall be there, Willie, once at least every day, until you come back again; and when the time comes round for your return, I shall be there all day, I do believe, and cheat myself with the hope that every homeward sail that passes is the one that will bring you to my arms! You will think of that, my boy, sometimes, and picture your poor mother there, will you not?’

They had crossed the lawn, and pre-

sently wound out of sight to the spot she had indicated, a mound at some distance behind the house, which afforded the best view of the Southampton waters, and all that came and went upon that silent highway.


‘That parting will almost break your daughter’s heart,’ said the rector, continuing his conversation with the old engraver: ‘my wife is quite upset with the thoughts of it, upon her account; she would, nevertheless, have come to-night, of course, but that she thought it kinder to leave them alone together.’

‘Mrs. Gresham is always kind, and knows what is best, whenever a kindness is to be done,’ said Mr. Thorne. ‘Tomorrow, indeed, will be a bitter trial; Maggie insists upon going to the docks to see him off; and when the boy is gone, what a journey home, alone——’

‘Nay, she will not be alone, you may be sure, Mr. Thorne,’ interrupted the other gravely; my companionship will indeed, I fear, be of little comfort, but she will certainly have *that*!’

‘You are a good man, sir.’


That was all the engraver said, or was capable of saying. He had borne up, as it was his nature to do, against the force of his own emotions, and was slow to exhibit them! but the departure of the boy who had been his companion from childhood, did, in fact, affect him very nearly, and yet, he knew that he could not measure his daughter’s sorrow by his own—that the morrow’s parting, as the rector had said, would almost break Maggie’s heart. The two men sat without a word, listening to the sounds of evening in that leafy world, and watching the round moon uprise and pour upon it



her noiseless treasure ; presently, the elder one dropped asleep, and his companion had left his chair, with the intention of taking silent farewell, when a startling sound fell upon his ear ; it was faint, and came apparently from a long way off ; but the rector had served his time in a very different cure from that he now held in the quiet forest—in courts and alleys of a great city, where quarrels and shouts often made night hideous—and he recognized it at once as the cry of a woman in fear. Before the sound had died away, Mr. Gresham was making his way in the direction from which it came, at a speed that would have astonished his parishioners to witness.

‘The Hillock,’ from which the cry proceeded, was, with its rustic seat and single fir-tree, a very prominent object, and before he reached it he was the

spectator of a curious scene. Besides the widow and her son, there appeared there a third person; a man clothed in rags, and of so swarthy a complexion that the rector did not for a moment doubt him to be one of the numerous gipsies—ordinarily quite harmless, except for their poaching propensities—that haunted the forest; from his gestures, this personage seemed to be addressing himself with vehemence to Mrs. Milbank, when suddenly the boy sprang at his throat, like a dog upon a deer, and dragged him to the ground. Again the cry, this time unmistakably for help, rose from the widow's lips, and it was answered only just in time. The gipsy, overpowered by the unexpectedness of the attack of his young antagonist, rather than by its force, had already recovered himself, and holding



the boy beneath him, was apparently about to kneel upon his throat, when the rector fell upon him, striking him from his victim by his sheer weight, with the power of a battering-ram, and rolling him down the hill. To follow was for the moment impossible; the parson was somewhat stout and plethoric; his exertions in running up-hill had already 'winded' him; and before he regained his breath, the intruder had sprung to his feet and disappeared in the depths of the forest. The boy, indeed, flushed and furious, would have pursued his enemy; but his mother had thrown her arms about him, and was beseeching him, in passionate accents, to remain where he was.


'Where on earth did that scoundrel spring from?' inquired the rector; 'and what could have induced you, Willie, to

fly at him, as I saw you do, like a wild-cat whose young has been shot ? ’

‘He insulted my mother,’ answered the boy, with intense excitement. ‘If my foot had not slipped, he would never have got the upper hand of me as he did. However, I will be even with him one day, for I shall know him anywhere, as he said he should know *me*.’

Mr. Gresham turned to Mrs. Milbank for an explanation of the matter, which her son was evidently far too excited to give ; but her answering glance at once exacted silence. Such a pleading, agonised look he had never beheld even on a death-bed. As they descended slowly to the cottage, Willie began, unasked, to give his version of the affair.


‘My mother and I were sitting on the bench together, Mr. Gresham, when that fellow suddenly stood before us : one



might have thought he had dropped from the clouds, except that such a scoundrel must needs come from below, and not from above: "And so I have tracked you two out at last," he said. Then, of course, we knew he was a madman; and my poor mother shrieked out, as she well might. Then he went on with some wild talk, saying he should know me anywhere, for it was easy to see I was my father's child; and then—then something else, for which I will pay him, whether he be mad or not, if we ever meet again.'

'Nay, Willie, but if he is mad,' argued the rector, 'he is not responsible for his words, any more than his actions. He is probably some gipsy whose brain has been set on fire by drink.'


'Nay; he is no gipsy,' said Willie positively.




‘Well, perhaps he has escaped from some asylum; to-morrow I will cause a thorough search to be made, and the poor wretch secured, so that when your mother comes back from Southampton she need have no further cause for fear. Your grandfather is, fortunately, asleep, and has heard nothing of this, and it will be just as well to say nothing about it, for fear of alarming him.’

By these arguments, and a promise that, for the future, one of the rector’s farm-servants should sleep at the cottage, while Willie was at sea, the boy was pacified. And after a while, Mr. Gresham took his leave.

In spite of the journey that lay before the widow on the morrow, and of the parting that awaited her, far more trying to her strength than any physical exertion, she never closed her eyes throughout that



night. For the second time during her life, the bitter experience was borne in upon her that, when matters seem at their very worst, a worse than that worst is still behind. For years her existence had been peaceful, serene, secure ; the secret that had at one time filled her with such misery and disquiet had become, to all seeming, absolutely safe, and indeed was so ; her forest-life, passed in the companionship of the old man and the boy, was all that she desired ; an evening calm, which, although premature, was inexpressibly welcome, had settled down upon her soul. Then, suddenly, Willie, who had been always so dutiful and gracious, though profiting but indifferently by the studies which Mr. Gresham superintended, exhibited a passionate yearning for the profession of a sailor. She was too wise and too



unselfish to show the pangs this cost her ; but she knew that when he should have left her home, the sunbeam that lit it up for her would have gone out, and all within it would become cold and grey till his return. Her passion for his unworthy father, her tenderness and pity for her dead husband, having lost their objects, had, as it seemed, concentrated themselves in one overwhelming affection for the orphan boy. To be about to lose him for years, perhaps for ever, had appeared to her to be the very cruellest shaft which Fate had in its quiver ; but now she knew that it had another, barbed far worse, and tipped with poison. Dennis Blake, whom she had flattered herself his own excesses must long ago have destroyed, was alive, and had found out her present retreat—‘tracked her out,’ as the wretch had said, which implied that he

had discovered her by design. From his manner and appearance it was easy to understand that his fortunes were desperate, and that no exercise of Mr. Inspector Brain's authority would now be of avail—even if, indeed, the lapse of time should have left him any power over him. It was true that Blake was at least equally powerless for any active harm; but there was now another channel through which his malice might work evil, which even her apprehensions, when of old she had forecast her future, had omitted to calculate upon. Willie was now no child, as he had been then; at present he believed implicitly that Maggie was his mother, and John Milbank his father; but he was only too apt to listen to the arguments of others, and to be swayed by them. And, *What if Blake should tell the boy who his father was, and who had killed him!*


At the idea of this, and of the consequences that must needs flow from it, poor Maggie's feelings experienced a complete inversion; so far from bewailing Willie's going to sea, she rejoiced in it, since it would remove him from this man, and put him out of reach of his adder's tongue. That he was about to depart upon the morrow was now absolutely a source of congratulation. Would to Heaven that he had departed yesterday! If she could only get him safe on board, without letting this man have further speech or sight of him, Maggie felt that she could still, once more, be almost happy.

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some he looked! How proud she felt of him that evening as she sat close to his side after dinner at the inn. His captain, with whom, notwithstanding her retiring habits, she had contrived to make acquaintance, in hopes to interest him in the boy—for what will not a woman do in the way of ‘bother’ or trouble in such a cause?—had given him leave up to the last moment, and there was still another hour before their parting. She sat with her hand in his, but spoke but little, for her heart was too full for speech. He was going from her for months, it might be for years, among strangers, and in a strange land, when he should be on land at all; and hitherto they had not been separated even for a day. He had been brought up at home, not indeed like a milksop, for he was athletic and manly beyond his age, but

he had never left the atmosphere of love that surrounded him at the cottage, to breathe the outer air: and now he was about to experience the rough side of life; hardships, and rude companions, and temptations; and she would not be by to cheer, console, or strengthen him. Such were the thoughts that gave to her full right to call herself his mother: there was nought of self pertaining to them. She did not picture to herself—at all events not now—the house all emptied of its mirth, to which she was about to go back; or the long nights when the wind should be up and wild in the forest, and wilder on the sea, when she should lie awake, and listen and pray—perhaps in vain—for her darling's safety: or the long days, which she should begin to count to-morrow, and which would grow longer as the time




drew on for his return, if indeed he did return; the eager lookings for a letter from the sea by every post; the disappointments and delays: the solitude and the evil that were to be. That these were all to come, she was indeed vaguely aware; but for the present Willie, and Willie's future, were all in all to her. The incident of the previous night had given her strength up to this moment—it had made it seem so all-important to get the boy on board ship, and out of the risk of Blake's gaining speech with him—that all else had been forgotten, but now that he was safe, or all but safe, her grief became a burden such as she could hardly bear.

They had dined royally, or rather Willie and Mr. Gresham had dined, while she had made pretence to do so,



and the boy, looking forward into life with such expectation as is only possible to youth or madness, and flushed with the unaccustomed good cheer, was in high spirits. His being so at such a time would not have given her pain—for, with all her woman's love, she was in all things sensible—but that it reminded her of his father, from whom he had inherited his thoughtless buoyancy, his audacious independence, and then of the man himself—his father. Then once again the fear smote her—supposing between cup and lip there should be a slip still; supposing Blake had tracked them to Southampton, and should intercept them on their way to the ship. She was lying in the docks, more than half a mile away, and such a thing might happen yet. She knew it was a foolish thought, and strove to drive it from her,



fly at him, as I saw you do, like a wild-cat whose young has been shot ? ’

‘He insulted my mother,’ answered the boy, with intense excitement. ‘If my foot had not slipped, he would never have got the upper hand of me as he did. However, I will be even with him one day, for I shall know him anywhere, as he said he should know *me*.’

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entrance-gate had to be thrown open to admit the vehicle, their task became difficult indeed.


‘Stop, stop that carriage!’ cried a hoarse, half-stifled voice behind them, which went like ice to Maggie’s heart; ‘I want to speak to——’

‘Quick, quick!’ cried she again. ‘That is the ship, driver;’ and she stood up, and pointed out the spot, where, amid the comparative darkness of the docks, shone the light of the departing vessel. She knew its place and it, though she had visited it but once, as well as its own captain, and would behold it for many a day and night, when it should be thousands of miles away, with every spar and sail distinct as she had seen them that morning. Willie, boylike, wondered to see his mother ‘in such a fidget,’ when there was still time to spare; but he set

it down, as he well might, to her disturbance and distress of mind upon his own account. Once again he folded her in his arms, before they reached the ship, where scoffing eyes might chill their last farewell; but though she passionately returned his embrace, her face was fixed upon the road behind them, striving to penetrate the gloom, and mark if they were followed by that slouching figure whose hateful tones were still ringing in her ears.

The quay, however, was reached by this time, where the departing vessel lay, and in it her precious charge was placed in safety.

‘God bless you, my boy,’ and ‘God bless *you*, mother’—those simple words that are associated with so many a bitter hour of human life—were duly whispered; and then she tore herself away, and with



the rector beside her, silent and sympathizing, watched from the shore the ropes cast off, the white sails belly in the night-breeze, and the huge ship slowly forge ahead with all her treasure.

‘We had better wait a bit, sir,’ said the driver of the carriage; ‘there’s a great crowd at the gates, they tell me, because of an accident that has happened.’

‘What accident?’ asked Mr. Gresham, not so much from interest in the matter, as because this talk with the driver would leave his companion more completely to herself.

‘Well, some drunken man, it seems, insisted on bursting in, just after we came through the gate; and not knowing his road, and being followed pretty sharp by the police, has come to grief—run right into the dock yonder.’

‘And was the poor fellow drowned?’

‘Why, no, sir: that he scarcely could have been with so many folks about; but, unfortunately for him, the dock was dry at the time, and he fell a sheer forty feet or more, and was killed upon the spot. They’re trying to find out whether anybody knows anything about him.’

‘*I know him,*’ exclaimed Maggie suddenly.


‘*You, my dear Mrs. Milbank?*’

‘Yes; I noticed a person, who I believe to be this unhappy man, following us in the street: if it be so, I know who he is; I can identify him. It is my duty to do so, is it not? Then let me see him.’


In vain the rector opposed her; she was resolute to tender her evidence, and she had her will. It was, as she had expected, nay, had hoped (how could it have been otherwise?—somebody was dead: then, surely, better that it should

be he than any other) ; it was indeed the body of Dennis Blake, whose bruised and battered face seemed even in death to menace her. When she saw him lying thus, however, his sins beyond her judgment, she felt no anger against him more, we may be sure ; but it was not in nature that she should not feel relief from fear—Emancipation.

When her boy came home, there would now be no human being that would have the will or power to sunder her and him ; to bid him call her by any less loving name than mother ; above all, to estrange him from her, as the wife of him who slew his father. Some explanation, indeed, was due to Mr. Gresham, who had recognized the dead man for the intruder of the previous night, whom he had ejected from the hillock ; and she gave it, with certain reservations. A



time came when she told all to him ; and a time, afterwards, when it could do no harm to tell it to the world, else it had not been written now. But why anticipate the inexorable years ? Let us rather dwell upon that happy hour when Willie came back from his first voyage, and leave him clasped in his mother's arms. With what devouring eyes she gazes on his sunburnt features, and runs her trembling fingers through his hair, and smooths the down upon his smiling lip ! How eagerly her ears drink in his animated talk of tropic wonders ! With what mutual joy they two set out his store of far-brought presents—these for grandpapa, those for the Greshams, those for their friends at Hilton ! The boy has forgotten none ; least of all, the only woman whom, as yet, he loves—his mother, as, thank Heaven ! he deems her.



Yes, Maggie is happy. Happier, on the whole, even when the boy is absent, and she and her old father pass the uneventful forest days together, than most women who, having thrown away their hearts upon such men as Richard Milbank, on life's threshold, have to pay the penalty of their error to its close. The liability which she incurred thereby was heavy indeed, and at one time went nigh to break her; but the Debt is paid at last, and she is Free.

THE END.

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